

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE RED BUFFALO





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
RED BUFFALO**

A young woman receives a recorded voice message left by her late father, revealing partial directions to retrieve a twenty-million-dollar painting from a very dangerous place. The Three Investigators take on the case knowing that they have to be quick to save the painting from being lost forever. However, despite various efforts, they are not able to figure out the location. Desperate, Jupiter, Pete and Bob resort to getting help from a very prominent person whom they know from past cases—someone who also happens to be their formidable nemesis.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Red Buffalo

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ??? und der rote Büffel

(The Three ??? and the Red Buffalo)

by

André Marx

(2025)

Cover art adapted from the Original by

Silvia Christoph

(2025-06-18)

Contents

1. The Secret Message
2. A Comic Book Villain
3. A Deal with Rubbish
4. The Motorcyclist Strikes
5. Lessons on Art Appreciation
6. *Le Buffle Rouge*
7. Another Source of Information
8. Face-to-Face with Hugenay
9. A Serious Mistake?
10. The Situation in Mercury
11. Warning: High Voltage!
12. The House of Roaring Waters
13. Jupiter Sets Off in Pursuit
14. Left or Right?
15. Unanswered Questions
16. Reconstruct from the Beginning
17. The Day after Tomorrow
18. *Chapeau!*

1. The Secret Message

“Heeelp!”

Jupiter Jones flinched. A woman had screamed!

The leader of The Three Investigators hung up the soldering iron he had used to repair a toaster and came out from the outdoor workshop of The Jones Salvage Yard—a business owned and operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda.

On this rainy afternoon, the salvage yard was deserted. That was nothing unusual in weather like this. Even Aunt Mathilda was nowhere to be seen. Was she perhaps sitting in front of the television watching one of her favourite movies? Had it just been a scream from a movie?

“Help me!”

No, it came from the street! Jupiter ran across the yard and went out through the main gate. On the other side of the street, a young woman was desperately tugging at the strap of her handbag to prevent it from being snatched by a man on a motorbike.

The woman noticed Jupiter. “Help me! I’m being robbed!”

Jupiter sprinted over. At the same time, the motorcyclist noticed him. He let go of the handbag and sped off so fast that the front wheel briefly lifted off the road surface. At the next junction, he turned right in a wide arc.

Suddenly, a red MG came towards the motorbike. Jupiter was startled. That was the car of the Second Investigator, Pete Crenshaw!

Both vehicles swerved to avoid each other. The motorbike lurched, and at the same time, the brakes on the MG squealed. The motorcyclist managed to control his vehicle and shot off, however, the car left the road and crashed into a lamp post. The bonnet burst open and white vapour hissed out from underneath.

“Pete!” For a moment, Jupiter didn’t know whether he should attend to the woman or run to his friend. By then the driver’s door had already been ripped open, and an enraged Pete got out of the car.

“Darn!” he yelled. He seemed to be physically unharmed.

Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief and turned to the woman. “How are you?” he asked anxiously. “Are you hurt?” She was a few years older than him, perhaps in her mid- or late twenties, had short black hair and was wearing a rain jacket.

“No harm done,” she gasped. “I was just scared out of my wits. The guy suddenly rode up behind me and tried to snatch my bag off my shoulder... but I didn’t let go.” She shivered slightly and hunched her shoulders. “Thank you for coming.”

“Do you know who that was, uh... Miss—”

“I’m Alba.” She held out her hand to him. “No, I have no idea.”

Pete came running over. “Did you see that?” he asked excitedly. “Do you know who that was?”

“A bag-snatcher,” Jupiter said and explained to his friend what had happened.

“That idiot! My MG was just back in good shape again. I’ve put so much time and labour into it, and now... the bumper and bonnet are ruined, and the radiator is busted wide open! I

can't fix it myself. The guy has to pay me for the damage. We have to find him. He was on a dark blue Honda. Jupe, did you get the licence plate number?"

Jupiter shook his head regretfully. "Everything happened too quickly for that, but it was a California plate, I'm pretty sure."

"I saw a big sticker on it—Batman... the Batman logo. That should help us somehow. We really need to find that guy."

"Later, Pete," Jupiter asked. "Alba, do you want to call the police? I'm from the salvage yard over there. It belongs to my uncle and aunt. I can get you a glass of water or a coffee if you like."

Alba nodded gratefully. "Coffee would be good. I'm in a bit of a shock. Anyway, I'm on my way to the salvage yard."

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter led Alba to the verandah of the salvage yard office and offered her a seat at a garden coffee table. In the meantime, Pete waited by the road for his friend and the third member of The Three Investigators, Bob Andrews, to come help him with his car. There was still a light drizzle.

Jupiter came out from the office with two steaming cups of coffee.

"I'm so sorry for your friend and his car," said Alba, gratefully taking a first sip.

"It wasn't your fault, it was the motorcyclist's. Can you make sense of this bag-snatching? Do you have any idea what the man was after?"

Alba shook her head. "Maybe he just needed money and tried to rob me. Things like that can happen. I don't want to let it drive me crazy." She took another sip and relaxed her shoulders. "The coffee feels good. Thank you again."

"Are you going to report the incident to the police?"

"I probably should... but first, you might be able to help me with something else. A friend recommended your salvage yard to me. He told me that I could find anything here, no matter what I'm looking for..." She rummaged in her handbag and pulled out a small black object that was about the size of a matchbox. "I need something to play this with..."

Jupiter knew immediately what it was. "A cassette for a dictation machine—a microcassette, to be precise."

"I sort of inherited it, but I couldn't play it because I didn't know where to get a suitable device. I was told they don't sell such things like that anymore."

"—At least not new ones," Jupiter added. "In such cases, it's always a good idea to come here to The Jones Salvage Yard. We have pretty much everything—even dictation machines... Just a moment." Jupiter left the verandah and went to a rickety cupboard in which various tape recorders were stored. He quickly found a dictation machine and brought it to Alba. "Here you go..."

Alba was delighted. "Thank you! Er... would it be possible to just borrow it for a moment? I just want to listen to this tape once."

"Sure, no problem," Jupiter replied. "I'll go get some batteries for you." He then went into the office, opened a drawer, brought out two AAA batteries.

"All right..." Jupiter inserted the batteries into the dictation machine and handed it to Alba. "Take your time..." With that, the First Investigator went back into the office.

Alba remained seated at the coffee table, but was still within earshot. There were no headphones connected to the dictation machine, and although Jupiter didn't want to listen in, he couldn't help but overhear.

A man spoke in a halting, hoarse voice. He seemed to find it difficult to speak:

“My dear Alba... this is your father...”

A pause followed, as if the man had not thought carefully about what he wanted to say beforehand.

“I would have liked to see you one last time before... before it ends with me... Twenty years have passed. I’m so sorry, Alba. I know I can’t make up for anything. The lost years are irretrievable... I want you to know that I always thought of you... but I couldn’t be with you. Please forgive me.”

Alba stopped the dictation machine. She sucked in the air, looked up at the cloudy sky and seemed to be fighting back tears. Jupiter was uncomfortable overhearing this very private message. He pretended to be reorganizing some old ashtrays on a shelf.

After a few seconds, Alba had composed herself and continued to play:

“I have an important message for you that will change your life... I’m telling this only to you... by recording it into this old thing from one of my cellmates... Uh... it’s about the Red Buffalo... a Fortunard. You have to find it and save it... otherwise, sooner or later... it might fall into the wrong hands... or be lost forever.”

Jupiter pricked up his ears. The Red Buffalo? Fortunard?

“If I couldn’t do anything else for you in your life, you should at least have the Red Buffalo. It’s not in Mandeville Canyon like everyone thinks... I will not only send you this tape, but also a key. Take it to Califor—”

Alba stopped the tape again. This time she couldn’t hold back the tears. She sobbed, pulled a handkerchief out of her jacket pocket and blew her nose loudly.

It was impossible for Jupiter to continue pretending not to notice. “Is everything all right?” he asked from the office doorway.

“Yes, yes, I... Sorry. I didn’t think it would affect me so much. This tape is from my father, you know. I haven’t seen him for twenty years, and...” She broke off. “He died... recently,” she continued after a short pause. “Before that, I didn’t even know he was still alive.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” Jupe said.

Alba waved it off, wiped her eyes dry and resolutely put the handkerchief back in her pocket. “That’s all right. I can hardly remember him... in fact, I said goodbye to him a long time ago—mentally, I mean... Sorry, you don’t want to hear all that.”

“It’s all right,” Jupiter replied, because he didn’t know what else to say.

Alba pressed the button again... but nothing could be heard. Strange, the recording hadn’t finished yet, had it?

Alba was surprised. She shook the dictation machine and played with the volume control. Nothing happened. “Something seems to be wrong here,” she said and turned to Jupiter.

The First Investigator took the device and immediately realized what was wrong. “You accidentally pressed the ‘record’ button instead of ‘play’.” He pressed the ‘stop’ button and rewound. The last words of Alba’s father were played back:

“... but also a key. Take it to Califor—”

There was a click, a few ambient noises were heard, and finally, after a few seconds:

“Something seems to be wrong here...”

“You accidentally pressed the ‘record’ button instead of ‘play’...”

Jupiter stopped the playback and looked regretfully at Alba. “I’m sorry, you recorded over a part of the message.”

2. A Comic Book Villain

Alba looked at Jupiter in dismay. “Is there any way to undo this?”

“Unfortunately not. It’s a magnetic tape. Once erased, the recording can’t be recovered... but wait, maybe there’s more on it.”

He let the tape continue. After a click, Alba’s father’s voice could be heard again:

“... and you have to be on your guard. Don’t forget that. It’s a dangerous place if you don’t know your way around it.” He sighed. *“I’m really sorry, Alba. I wish I could have been a better father to you, but...”*

His voice broke and he didn’t finish the sentence. There was another click and the recording stopped.

Tears welled up in Alba’s eyes again—this time, sadness mixed with anger. “What a mess! The first message from my father in over twenty years and I erased part of it.”

“I should have assisted you,” Jupiter said.

“Nonsense. I’m not a toddler. I was just too stupid! I didn’t even realize what he was trying to tell me. I need to hear it all again.” She wanted to rewind, but stopped and handed Jupiter the dictation machine. “Can you do that? Otherwise I’ll accidentally erase the rest too.”

Jupiter rewound the tape and then let it run from the beginning. He wanted to turn away, but Alba held him back until the message ended and looked at him questioningly. “The *Red Buffalo*? Something ‘fortunate’? Should that tell me something?”

“I don’t know your father—” Jupiter began.

“Neither did I.”

“—But the *Red Buffalo* tells me something,” Jupe continued. “It’s the name of a very famous painting from the beginning of the twentieth century. The painter was a Frenchman called François Fortunard. Your father didn’t say ‘fortunate’, but ‘Fortunard’.”

Alba looked at him with wide eyes. “Do you really think so? I’ve never heard of this *Red Buffalo*. What a lucky coincidence that I came across such a clever chap as you... but I still don’t understand what my father could have meant by that. Save the *Red Buffalo*? From what? And where am I supposed to find it?”

“I can’t answer that either. I would need more information for that.”

Alba suppressed a giggle. “You sound like a policeman or a detective.”

“Well, I happen to be one.”

“A policeman? But you are so young!”

“No, a detective—an investigator,” Jupe clarified. “I run an investigation agency with two of my friends, Pete and Bob. We’ve already successfully solved quite a few cases.”

The First Investigator reached into his back trouser pocket for a business card of The Three Investigators. However, he had to first pull out a flat metal container of soldering flux and that got his fingers greasy. When he finally got out a card, he left a faint greasy spot at the bottom-right corner of the card when he handed it to Alba. The card said:



When Alba was looking at the card, Jupiter continued: “We’ve even had to deal with a Fortunard painting before—a different one though. In the end, we found it to be a forgery anyway.” He was recalling their past case entitled *The Mystery of the Shrinking House*.

She frowned. “Are you kidding me?”

“Not at all.”

“Another coincidence! First you saved me on the street and now... it’s as if fate has brought us together.”

“The bag-snatching...” Jupiter murmured thoughtfully. “Alba, is it possible that the motorcyclist wasn’t after the money in your handbag, but this tape?”

“Do you think so?”

“I think it’s possible. After all, the tape mentions a valuable painting.”

“—But how would the motorcyclist know what was in my...” She broke off. “Just a moment. It’s perfectly plausible. My father died in prison. He was... well, a criminal. Who knows what kind of people he had to deal with there? Who knows what he did himself? He could have been involved in anything. I have no idea.”

Jupiter raised his eyebrows. “You don’t know what he was convicted of?”

“I don’t know much about him in general. There were probably various things he was accused of. He left my mum and me when I was very young. He only came around every now and then. The last time he visited, I must have been five or six. My mum never spoke much about him... but what little she did say didn’t reflect well on him. I think he was... a violent man.

“Well, and then a few days ago, the prison administration managed to reach me. They told me that my father had passed away, and I was to come here to LA to see to his remains and to collect his personal belongings... It was a shock. I went there and was handed this cassette along with a key.”

“—The key mentioned in the recording?”

“Probably.” She reached into her handbag and took out a simple house key on an equally simple metal ring with a plastic tag dangling from it. On the tag was written: ‘Washington Street, CC’.

“Before you ask,” Alba continued, “I have no idea what this key is for or what ‘CC’ means.”

“Where did you grow up?”

“In Pacific Palisades. As far as I know, there’s no Washington Street there. After the separation, my mother moved with me to Oregon, where I still live. I only came here because of my father’s things. Right now I’m staying in a motel.”

“Okay, and what was your father’s name?”

Alba grinned. “You’re really serious about being an investigator, aren’t you? This is like an interrogation.”

“I want to get an overview of the facts.”

“All right, then. For a better overview—my father’s name was Javier Juárez.”

Jupiter winced inwardly. He was familiar with that name... and not only that—the Señor Juárez he knew was also a convicted and imprisoned criminal. However, there must have been many people with that name, and Alba’s father should have been older than the Juárez he had in mind.

“As far as I know, he suffered from a very aggressive form of cancer,” Alba continued, unaware of Jupiter’s thoughts. “He was only in his mid-forties. That’s probably why things didn’t work out between my parents. They were both still very young when I was born. That’s almost all I know. I once looked him up on the Internet. He apparently had a kind of nickname—‘Night Shadow’. Sounds a bit like a comic book villain, doesn’t it?”

Jupiter had to pull himself together so that Alba wouldn’t notice him. The Señor Juárez he knew was also known as Night Shadow! Jupiter remembered it well, because it had been The Three Investigators who were responsible for getting him to prison!

Alba sensed that something was amiss and looked at Jupiter questioningly. “Is something wrong?”

3. A Deal with Rubbish

Jupiter opened his mouth and didn't know what to say.

"Hey, Jupe!" Pete called from the main gate at that moment. "Do you think I can park my car next to the storeroom for now?"

"Sure!" shouted Jupiter, glad of the distraction. He came off the verandah to push aside a few broken children's bicycles that were in the way.

The red MG rolled into the yard. Pete sat inside and steered, while Bob and a bearded man in a stained trench coat pushed from behind. Oddly, on the roof of the car was a huge brass wind instrument with seaweed hanging between its coils and valves.

It was only when Pete slowly steered his car around that Jupiter recognized the bearded man who was helping to push. Not only was his coat stained, he was also rather unkempt overall. His hair was long, messy, and slightly greasy.

"Hello, Rubbish-George!" Jupiter greeted him.

The vagrant, well-known in Rocky Beach, was an acquaintance of The Three Investigators. Jupiter hadn't seen him for a while, but wasn't surprised by his sudden appearance.

"Good afternoon, sir... and the honoured lady." Rubbish indicated a bow as Alba stepped closer. "I arrived just in time to assist Pete and Bob with their... uh... vehicle haulage. Actually, I was bringing this fantastic musical instrument to Titus Jones's cabinet of curiosities. Isn't it marvellous?"

"It's a tuba," Jupiter said.

"—But what a tuba! It even makes a sound... sometimes. Because of its unique patina, it is destined to spend the next stage of its life in The Jones Salvage Yard—at least that's what I thought until just now. Now I think this instrument would also suit you perfectly, young lady."

"Me?" Alba laughed. "I'm sorry, but I'm already out of my depth with a tape recorder."

"You don't have to play it. A tuba like that is also suitable as a decorative object. You can plant flowers in it, or put it out in the afternoon sun and watch the play of light as it slowly moves across the polished brass."

"How very creative," Alba commented, giving Rubbish-George a generous smile.

"They call me the 'da Vinci of the Gutter'." George smiled back.

"Where did you get it?" Jupiter asked, moderately interested.

"I pulled it out of the sea, although I was actually after a herring or halibut for dinner... but as they say, if you cast a line, don't complain if you catch something. So, dear lady, how about it? A hundred dollars?"

Alba stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Eighty for the tuba, because it's you... All right, seventy... but that's my best price. After all, I have to make a living."

"Very nice, but I'm not interested."

At that moment, Mathilda Jones stepped through the main gate into the yard, heavily laden with shopping bags.

"There's my aunt coming back. Why don't you try her?" Jupiter suggested to the vagrant.

Rubbish-George knew that he wouldn't have an easy time getting rid of his find with Aunt Mathilda either. Nevertheless, he nodded. "I'll try... and if you're ever interested in the play of light on brass surfaces, you'll find me on a small houseboat in the harbour—where there are heaps of nautical objects made of brass."

He lifted the tuba from the roof of the car and turned to Aunt Mathilda. "Mrs Jones! I can tell you're a musical woman. Wait, may I help you with your shopping?"

Jupiter turned back to their visitor. "Alba, here are my friends and colleagues—Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. Together we are The Three Investigators... and this is Alba—our new client."

"Client?" asked Bob. "Are we going after the bag-snatcher?"

"I'd definitely go after him," Pete said grimly, "because of my car."

"It's quite possible that the attempted bag-snatching is connected to Alba's case," Jupiter said, "but there is more to it."

"It's a message that my late father left me on an old cassette tape," explained Alba, "of which I had partly erased earlier, as stupid as I am." She played the message back to Bob and Pete.

Bob listened attentively. "Fortunard? The *Red Buffalo* by Fortunard? Did your father really say that?"

Alba nodded. "You heard of this Fortunard too? You're really clever boys. The message didn't mean anything to me."

"François Fortunard was a famous painter. He was known for his brightly coloured depictions of nature and animals. He mainly painted them in bright and odd colours that deviate from reality. The *Red Buffalo* is one of his most famous works." Bob pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and tapped on it. "The *Red Buffalo*... here it is." He held the display up to them.

The painting showed a buffalo with huge curved horns. It was standing by itself in the centre of a meadow, as if it was posing for a photograph. On the right was a tree; on the left, a pond; and in the background were mountains and the sky. Significantly, the sky was green; the mountains were purple; the pond water was yellow; the tree and meadow were blue; and of course, the buffalo was red.

Even by just looking at a photograph on a small phone display, they could see a strange combination of hues used to achieve a visually striking and energetic effect.

"I think I've seen that before," said Alba.

"Quite possibly," Bob replied. "As I said, it's quite famous."

"—But if it's so famous and valuable, then surely it must be well-protected in some museum. How am I supposed to save it? And from what anyway?"

"Hold on, we'll get to that in a minute," Bob announced and proceeded to tap on his mobile phone again. "The *Red Buffalo* isn't hanging in a museum. It was sold at an auction four years ago for a record sum."

"—And to whom?" Pete asked.

"The buyer bid anonymously. That's probably a typical approach for such a valuable painting. Did your father have anything to do with art?"

"My father..." Alba interrupted herself. "My father seems to be no stranger to your friend Jupiter—at least he nearly choked when I mentioned my father's name earlier." She looked at the First Investigator. "Am I right?"

Jupiter sighed. There was probably no point in keeping it from Alba any longer. If The Three Investigators really wanted to proceed with this case, he had to play with open cards.

"Alba, we know your father. We met him before."

“We did?” Pete marvelled.

“Yes. His name was Javier Juárez, also known as Night Shadow.”

Pete audibly sucked in his breath. “Oh my goodness!”

Bob couldn’t hide his surprise either.

Alba cleared her throat. “Would you be so kind as to fill me in?”

“The situation is complex...” Jupiter began, “and we don’t want to give the impression that—”

“We were involved in getting your father to prison,” Pete interrupted him, “after he chased us with an axe.”

Everyone stared at the Second Investigator.

“It wasn’t that complex, Juve,” he defended himself. “Why should we keep quiet about what happened?”

“Nobody said anything about keeping quiet,” said Jupiter, slightly annoyed. “Sorry, Alba, I would have liked to have told you a little less... directly...”

She swallowed. “What exactly happened?”

Bob gave a brief account of what happened in *The Secret of Fire Moon*: “We were involved in a case about a valuable painting. Our adversary was actually Victor Hugenay, the famous art thief. Perhaps you’ve heard of him. Señor Juárez, alias Night Shadow, was initially his henchman and later his adversary. So at that time, they both went for the same painting, and we got caught in the middle.”

“—But in the end, we were a bit quicker and managed to turn the tables on them...” Jupiter added, “and both went to prison.”

Shaking her head, Alba turned away. She had to process this new information first. “Goodness! He really came after you with an axe?” she finally asked.

“Er... yeah...” Pete replied and shuddered when he recalled the incident. “He was a dangerous man.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to realize that too,” Alba said.

“We’re sorry, Alba,” Bob said sympathetically.

She waved him off. “Don’t be. He was a criminal. It’s not like you made it up. Maybe I should be grateful that I never knew him. I’m sticking to my guns—fate brought us together, that’s more than obvious... and that’s why I want to hire you as investigators. It would be really great if you could make up for my idiocy with the erased tape and find out more about this mysterious message. I’m a bit lost and don’t know what to do now.”

Jupiter looked at his friends. “Fellas?”

“As long as we catch the guy who got my car busted, I’m in,” said Pete.

Bob nodded. “Me too.”

“Then The Three Investigators have a new case,” the First Investigator announced.

Alba clasped her hands together. “How exciting! How do you want to proceed?”

“If we want to save the *Red Buffalo*, we first have to find out where the painting is. At the same time, we should find out more about your father. Maybe we can piece together the erased part of the message if we have more information about him.”

“Rubbish-George!” said Bob, snapping his fingers. “He was the one who warned us about Night Shadow back then. He knew him. Maybe he can tell us more.”

Rubbish-George was about to leave the salvage yard. He still had the tuba under his arm.

“George, wait!” Jupiter yelled.

“Aha!” the vagrant responded. “I knew you’d come around. You know a quality product when you see it—unlike your aunt. Do you know how much she offered me? Twenty dollars. Twenty! Can you believe that?”

“It’s really amazing that she was prepared to give you so much,” Jupiter commented.

“I’d rather keep this thing myself... and learn how to play it,” George said. “I could earn more busking on the street.”

“Well, have fun with your new instrument,” Jupiter said, “but before you go, George, I’m interested in something else. Do you remember Night Shadow?”

The vagrant’s brow furrowed. “I do remember him. What about him?”

“That’s what we’d like to know. We need information about him.”

Rubbish-George hesitated as he sensed a deal. It was easy to see that on his face. “Well... I already know a few things about this dodgy gentleman.”

“So do we,” Bob added. “We know, for example, that he has died.”

Rubbish nodded. “—In prison. Yes, I’ve heard that too.”

“What we’d like to know now is everything else,” Jupiter said. “What he was up to before he went to prison; who he did business with; where he lived; and so on.”

Rubbish-George raised his eyebrows. “That’s quite a lot. That’ll be... how shall I put it...”

“—Not cheap,” Pete sighed.

“I’d have to ask around... perhaps ask a few people I don’t usually socialize with. Also, it’s difficult at the moment as I’m a bit short of cash.”

“That’s a surprise,” Bob muttered with amusement.

“We’ll buy your tuba from you,” Jupiter offered and pulled some notes out of his wallet and handed the money to George.

“That’s only thirty dollars.”

“It’s more than my aunt wanted to pay you.”

“—But this thing costs a hundred.”

“It was down to seventy earlier.”

“That’s for the lady here. It’s a hundred for you.”

Jupiter took a deep breath. “Listen, Rubbish. We—”

“I’ll give you eighty,” Alba said, taking a step forward and pressing a couple of dollar notes into the vagrant’s hand. “We’ll do the deal.”

4. The Motorcyclist Strikes

The vagrant left happily and Alba also said goodbye shortly afterwards, leaving the three boys to their work. Because of the uncomfortable weather, the boys retreated to their headquarters.

Headquarters was the office and secret hideout of The Three Investigators. It was inside an old mobile home trailer hidden under a pile of junk within the premises of the salvage yard. Access to the trailer was through secret entrances, the main one being the 'Cold Gate'. This was a large unused refrigerator seemingly embedded randomly in the same pile of junk. The interior was modified such that the back could be pushed aside to reveal a short corrugated metal tunnel that led to the trailer.

Inside the trailer, the three of them had stocked almost everything they needed for their investigations—computer and communication systems, electrical and electronic gadgets, audio-video devices, and even a small crime lab. In addition, there were comfortable armchairs, a working refrigerator, and cabinets for storing records of their past cases. Many of the things were refurbished from items they got from the salvage yard. In return, the boys regularly helped out with work in the yard.

"Night Shadow..." Pete mumbled, dropping into a crumpled armchair. "I never thought I'd hear that name again."

Bob and Jupiter also made themselves comfortable. Rain pelted down on the roof of the trailer.

"Who would have thought we'd have to deal with him again," said Bob, "or rather with his estate. What do you think is behind this?"

"He was hardly the owner of the painting," said Pete, "even if his message almost makes it sound like he wanted to bequeath it to his daughter."

"He couldn't have been the owner," agreed Bob. "The painting was sold at an auction four years ago for twenty million dollars. Anyone with that kind of money wouldn't have needed to work as a henchman for Victor Hugenay."

"Certainly not..." Jupiter muttered absently and began to pinch his lower lip. "—But Victor Hugenay might still be involved."

Pete looked at him in surprise. "What makes you think of that? He's still in prison, isn't he?"

"It's about a work of art worth millions, Pete. Night Shadow wasn't an art connoisseur, just a dangerous petty criminal and Hugenay's henchman. He carried out jobs for him so that Hugenay didn't have to get his own hands dirty. At first, he had nothing to do with valuable paintings, until his connection to Hugenay got him hooked... and he wanted a bigger slice of the pie. In a way, he emulated Hugenay. If he suddenly had valuable information about a Fortunard painting, then a connection to Hugenay is very possible. We should keep that in mind in our investigations... but first we have to find out who is in possession of the *Red Buffalo*. There may be nothing to the warning that the painting is in danger. I don't want to chase after a pipe dream. Bob, do you think you can find out who bought this twenty-million-dollar painting?"

“That could be difficult,” Bob replied. “There’s probably not much point in contacting the auction house. They won’t tell me anything.”

“What about that canyon?” asked Pete. “The tape message mentioned something about a canyon. What’s the name of that place?”

“Mandeville Canyon,” Jupiter replied, “but Juárez said the painting wasn’t there.”

“—Although everyone thinks it is,” Bob continued thoughtfully. “It’s a bit strange to follow a trail that supposedly doesn’t lead to the painting—but it’s still the only clue we’ve got. Mandeville Canyon isn’t very densely populated. I’ll have a look at who lives there.” Bob sat down at the computer and began his research.

Meanwhile, Jupiter talked about the key that Alba had received with the cassette tape. “Juárez said: ‘Take it to California’. I assume that this was followed by specific instructions on where and for what this key was to be used, but this information has been erased on the tape. The only thing we know is that the place can be dangerous ‘if you don’t know your way around it’.”

“What was written on the key tag again?” asked Pete.

“Washington Street, CC.”

“Anyway, that hardly helps. There’s probably a Washington Street in almost every town... and CC? Block C... Apartment C perhaps... or Section C, Corridor C, or—”

“You made your point, Pete,” Jupe interrupted his friend.

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice came to them from outside. “I know you’re hiding here somewhere! Remember the bikes, do you hear?”

The First Investigator sighed. “Uncle Titus is donating the bikes outside to a children’s home, but they have to be refurbished first.”

“I’ll tell you what needs refurbishing,” said Pete. “My MG.”

“That may be, but Aunt Mathilda has been bugging me for days about the bikes. If we don’t get it done soon, she’s going to be very unhappy. As long as Bob is still doing his research, we should get on with this task.”

Pete reluctantly accepted his fate. They left Headquarters and worked on the bikes for two hours.

When Bob joined them, it was already getting dark. He looked excited. “Fellas, I think I’ve found a lead. In addition to a few Hollywood celebrities and musicians, an art collector also lives in Mandeville Canyon. His name is Sylvester Byron. He is the rich heir to a software company and owns a number of famous paintings. I haven’t found anything about the *Red Buffalo*, though.”

“Well done, Bob,” said Jupiter. “We should get in touch with him.”

“I’ve already done that, and he replied straight away! He’s expecting us at his house tomorrow and will show us his collection.”

“That was quick,” Pete marvelled. “What did you tell him?”

“The usual... that we’re writing an article for the school magazine—about the passion of collecting art.”

“The passion of collecting art? For a school magazine?” Pete had his doubts.

“That’s beside the point. He loves his art. As long as we’re enthusiastic, he’ll tell us everything we want to know.”

When Pete and Bob had said their goodbyes, Jupiter went to take a shower to wash the bike dirt off his body. He then returned to Headquarters. He wanted to look up all the Washington Streets in the neighbourhood on the Internet. After all, he had to start somewhere.

He hadn't got very far when the phone rang. It was Alba. She sounded excited.

"Jupiter, I hope I'm not interrupting you so late, but I had to call you straight away."

"What's happened?"

"There was a break-in in my motel room. I was just out for a quick burger. When I came back, the door had been forced open. My stuff had been rummaged through. It's not bad—just a bit of a mess, but someone was definitely looking for something."

"Was anything missing?"

"No. The burglar didn't steal anything, as far as I could tell."

"Did he leave any traces behind?"

"I certainly don't have as trained an eye as you investigators, but I'd say no. I wanted to call you straight away because after everything that's happened today..."

"Do you suspect a connection?"

"To be honest, yes... or am I imagining things?"

"I don't think so. Two attempted thefts in one day are certainly no coincidence. Someone's after the contents of your bag. Did you take it out with you?"

"No, it was in my room... and it was rummaged through, but the intruder didn't take anything. I left the cassette with you and I had the small key with me."

"You were lucky. Take good care of the key. Are you going to stay at the motel tonight?"

"You mean, am I scared? Oh, I'll just put the chain on. Tomorrow I'll get the motel manager to fix the lock. I don't think the intruder will come back again."

"Okay, take care. Thank you for letting us know straight away, Alba. This is also a warning to us."

After Jupiter had hung up, he turned the cassette tape thoughtfully between his fingers. He should play it again. Maybe he'd notice something else.

Where had he put the dictation machine? The First Investigator was rummaging around on the desk when he heard a rattling noise from outside. It came from somewhere in the salvage yard, but there shouldn't be anyone there at this time of the night.

"Strange," Jupe murmured and he quickly stood up and took a look through 'See-All'—a periscope constructed from stove pipes and mirrors that protruded from the roof of the trailer. This device could be rotated to enable him to look over the piled-up junk and scan the area around their trailer without being seen—just like in a submarine.

It was already dark outside. The First Investigator aimed the periscope at the main gate, and true enough, there was someone outside the gate fiddling with the padlock. The dim light coming from the street lamps was not sufficient for him to see who that was.

Seconds later, the rattling stopped. The intruder perhaps realized that he could not open the lock, and gave up trying. However, in the next moment, the person slumped down to the ground and sat there facing the street with his back against the gate. Now, Jupe could identify who that was.

Quickly he grabbed his bunch of keys on the table and rushed out of the trailer. In the tunnel, he realized that he was still holding the microcassette. Without wanting to waste time, he put it and the bunch of keys into his jumper pocket. Then he went out through the Cold Gate.

The First Investigator crept across the salvage yard. As he approached the main gate, the figure was still sitting on the ground, not moving, but mumbling to himself something indistinguishable.

"George!" Jupiter said, stepping behind the man with a distinctive beard and who was wearing a trench coat.

“Aaaargh!” The vagrant was startled and turned his head around. “My goodness, Jupiter, you’ve got a lot of nerve scaring me like that!”

“Likewise, George. What are you doing here at this time of the night?”

“I came here because I have some information for you.”

“About Night Shadow? That was quick,” Jupiter remarked approvingly.

“They call me the ‘Man with all the Contacts’.”

“I thought you were the ‘da Vinci of the Gutter’?”

“That too! They call me many names.”

“In that case, you’d better come in first,” Jupe said as he took out his bunch of keys, unlocked the padlock, and opened the gate.

However, the vagrant remained unmoved on the ground. Jupiter was puzzled. There was something strange about Rubbish-George. Was he drunk? True enough, when Jupe bent down, George let out a loud burp, and the First Investigator could smell his alcohol-laden breath.

“Phew!” Jupe gasped. “I suppose you just came from Silver Blaze.” He was referring to a pub located a short distance from the salvage yard.

The First Investigator then helped the vagrant get up and supported him into the salvage yard. They made their way to the yard office verandah and Jupe pulled up a chair for the vagrant to sit at the garden coffee table.

“Can I get you something?” Jupe asked, but George made a dismissive gesture with his hand, looking slightly agitated.

“On second thought, you probably had too much to drink already,” the First Investigator remarked. He then wondered whether he should turn on the lights on the verandah but he decided against it as the faint light from the street lamp that fell over the fence was sufficient.

“So what do you want to tell me?” Jupe asked.

Lowering his voice and slurring his words a little, the vagrant said: “First of all, a little birdie told me... where Night Shadow was hanging around... before he was arrested.” He paused for a little too long. “—In California City. You know, that strange town in the desert.”

Jupiter’s face brightened. “California City—CC!”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s all right. You’ve just solved a little mystery for us. That’s very valuable information.”

“Of course... What about the ‘House of Roaring Waters’? Does that also solve a mystery?”

“The House of Roaring Waters?”

“Another place that the little birdie has... chirped about.”

“No, it doesn’t ring a bell. Where is that supposed to be?”

“I don’t know... It’s just a name that had... uh... come to my ears.”

“Have you got any more?”

Rubbish-George hesitated, and let out another burp. He swayed slightly and had to hold on to the coffee table.

Jupiter sighed and pulled the same crumpled thirty dollars out of his trouser pocket. “I’m a bit short of money, but I’ve been earning a little extra working for my aunt. If you could be patient for another day or two...”

Rubbish-George waved it off. He seemed almost offended as if Jupiter had embarrassed him with the offer. “This tip is on the house.”

“Really?”

“It’s to be careful... and don’t trust anyone...”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m just saying it.”

“You cautioned us about Night Shadow back then,” Jupiter recalled, “but he’s dead now.”

“All other people should treat this matter with caution.” Rubbish looked at him insistently. His gaze was blurred. “Do you understand me? All of you... Maybe you’d better keep your hands off that thing.”

The First Investigator pricked up his ears. “What thing?”

“The thing you’re on the trail of.”

“What thing are we on the trail of?”

Rubbish blinked in irritation. “You know that better than anyone.”

“—But I’d like you to tell me. Who is this little birdie? And what else did it tell you?”

“I shouldn’t have come,” he replied. He made yet another loud and disgusting burp before getting up.

“Rubbish, wait!”

The vagrant didn’t respond. Instead, he turned and staggered towards the main gate. The First Investigator came up behind him and supported him out.

“Hey, George,” Jupe said. “Can you make your way back?”

“Not to worry,” George replied. “I’ll manage.”

Jupiter stood outside the gate and looked thoughtfully at the vagrant crossing the street. Rubbish-George had been behaving very strangely. Had he plucked up the courage to come here, especially in the middle of the night?

As soon as the vagrant was out of sight, Jupe went back into the salvage yard, and took out his bunch of keys to lock the main gate.

Completely out of the blue, a blow came to the back of his head. Jupiter went to his knees. Only then did the sharp pain come... and then he blacked out!

Jupiter wasn’t unconscious for long—one minute at most. He hadn’t even really hit the ground, but was still crouching on all fours. His head was buzzing, and his field of vision was as narrow as a tunnel. At the very edge, he could see a dark figure running away across the street.

The First Investigator picked himself up and felt his head. There was no blood on his fingers, which was reassuring.

Then, he realized what had happened. When he accompanied Rubbish-George to the office verandah, he had left the main gate open. That was how the intruder entered the savage yard.

The First Investigator took a few deep breaths. Had he been robbed? Everything that had been in his trouser pockets was still there... however, the jumper pocket was empty. The microcassette!

The next moment, he heard a motorbike start up and roar away.

5. Lessons on Art Appreciation

The next day, The Three Investigators met at Headquarters, when Pete and Bob learned about the events of the previous night.

"That does it!" Pete exclaimed angrily. "First that guy nearly takes down my MG and now he's got the cassette tape too!"

"Nobody is more annoyed than me," said Jupiter contritely. "I should have been more careful after Alba's call! If I'd left the tape here at Headquarters, the guy would never have found it."

"That can't be changed now," Bob said. "We now know for sure that we have an adversary. That guy is after the information about the *Red Buffalo*."

"Just who is that 'Batman'?" Pete wondered. "Maybe a former prison inmate? Someone Juárez had been talking to?"

"Possibly," said Jupiter.

"We have to find him," said Pete resolutely. "I want to get him. How about the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup?"

The First Investigator was sceptical. "We don't have enough information for that."

"We've got a dark blue Honda motorbike with a California licence plate, and with a Batman sticker," said Pete. "That should be enough for a start." He didn't wait for Jupiter's response, but picked up the phone straight away.

"Hi, Jeffrey, it's me. It's the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup time again. We're looking for a dark blue Honda motorbike..."

The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup had been Jupiter's creation. Each of The Three Investigators called a few friends to ask for certain information. If the friends didn't know, they were asked to forward the request to a few other friends and repeat the process. Within a short time, the request for information could reach many people. Hopefully, someone would report back to the boys sooner or later. The hookup participants were referred to as 'ghosts' since they were just voices over the telephone, and the boys really would not know most of them personally.

Bob and Jupiter followed Pete's lead and made their calls. Fifteen minutes later, the hookup had started. Now they just had to wait for the results. Experience showed that it could take a few days before someone responded to the hookup.

"The 'CC' on the key tag almost certainly stands for 'California City'," Jupiter said. "Juárez's message mentioned a key and to 'take it to Califor—' before Alba erased the rest of the sentence. I had assumed that he meant to say 'California', but it was 'California City'! There's a Washington Street there, I've already looked it up."

"What about the House of Roaring Waters?" asked Pete.

"I haven't found that online," Juve replied, "but an unsuccessful online search doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Maybe it's a code name."

"At least, thanks to Rubbish-George, we have a knowledge advantage over Batman," Pete remarked.

"Oh no!" Juve exclaimed. "What did you just say?"

"—That we have a knowledge advantage over Batman," Pete replied. "Why?"

"It just occurred to me that when Batman sneaked into the salvage yard last night, he could have overheard everything George told me!" Jupe cried.

"Uh-oh!" Bob uttered.

"We cannot take any chances and have to act fast," Jupe decided. "It's best if we split up. Two of us will go to the appointment with Sylvester Byron. One of us will make our way to California City with Alba."

"Why go with Alba?" asked Bob.

"I spoke to her on the phone earlier. She insisted on coming with us. I think she wants to stay as close to our investigation as possible. Besides, she still has the key."

"My car is not going anywhere, I'm afraid." The Second Investigator pointed accusingly in the direction of his MG outside. "I'm so angry, really!"

"We've noticed, Pete," said Jupiter, slightly annoyed. "Well, I can use Uncle Titus's pick-up, but only for a few hours. It's not enough for a trip to California City and back."

"Then I'll drive there in my Beetle and you two go meet Sylvester Byron," Bob decided.

Jupiter agreed, even though he would have liked to go to California City himself. "Remember Night Shadow's warning: 'It's a dangerous place if you don't know your way around it.'"

Bob nodded seriously.

Five minutes later, they were on their way.

Mandeville Canyon was located in the Santa Monica Mountains. Rain-heavy clouds clung to the mountainsides and darkened the day. Sylvester Byron's villa was situated on a spacious, lushly landscaped property.

Jupiter rang the front doorbell. It swung open and in front of them stood a stocky, pale man in his forties with slicked-back hair. He was wearing an airy, sand-coloured linen suit and had a fluffy white cushion in the crook of his arm. It was only when the supposed cushion moved that Pete realized that it was a Persian cat.

"Right on time to the minute. I appreciate that." Mr Byron's voice was a little shrill, and his handshake was soft. "You must be Jupiter and Pete..." Bob had earlier called Mr Byron to inform him that Jupiter and Pete would be going instead of him.

"Yes, I'm Jupiter," the First Investigator said. "Thank you for your time."

"—And I'm Pete." When Pete shook Mr Byron's hand, the Persian cat hissed and extended his claws.

"It's okay, Percy, these are our guests," the host said and then turned to the boys. "Come in, come in."

They entered a spacious entrance hall with several impressively illuminated paintings, drawings and prints hanging on the walls. It was a colourful hodgepodge from all eras—medieval oil portraits of noblemen hung next to architectural ink drawings and screamingly colourful pop art. Nothing matched, but in a strange way, this made the collection so appealing.

"You really have collected a lot of art," remarked Jupiter.

"It's my great passion," said Mr Byron, "and it makes me happy when young people are interested in it too. That doesn't happen often, really not often. Which era are you most passionate about?" Byron looked at Pete. Percy the cat was also looking at the Second Investigator. The cat looked extremely grim and seemed to see right through him.

"Er, that one." Pete pointed to the nearest painting. He couldn't even tell what it depicted.

“Cubism...” Mr Byron nodded knowingly. “It’s a broad field. Well, what do you think of a little tour to start with?”

Pete nodded eagerly. “We would appreciate it very much, sir!”

Jupiter took out a small notebook and a pencil from his pocket, and he nudged Pete to do the same. They had to play along with their ruse of writing an article for the school magazine.

Sylvester Byron led them up a staircase to the first floor. He stopped in front of a door, where fixed on one side was a numeric keypad with a little red LED light. Mr Byron keyed in a code and the little light switched from red to green. The host then opened the door and invited the two investigators in.

“Speaking of Cubism, these here are Picasso lithographs—a whole series. Beautiful, isn’t it? That one there is the only one I have by Chagall... and this landscape is by Ed Stingwood, even though it’s hard to believe at first glance...”

While the host was giving more details of his collection, the boys jotted down some notes for their supposed article. After a few minutes there, Mr Byron led them out, closed the door and pressed a button on the keypad to arm the door. The LED light changed from green to red.

Next, Mr Byron led them to an adjacent room. Again, there was a numeric keypad next to the door, and Mr Byron began to key in the code.

“Aa-aa-ahh-choo!” Jupiter suddenly let out a huge sneeze, and dropped his pencil, which rolled away from him to the edge of the wall.

Jolted out of his state of serenity, Percy hissed loudly.

“Good grief, Jupe!” Pete remarked as the First Investigator scrambled forward to pick up his pencil.

“Sorry!” Jupe apologized.

“Bless you!” Mr Byron said as he opened the door, led the two of them in, and began another lecture about his collection.

... And so it went, Mr Byron took them through a few more secured rooms, all of which contained works of art. He explained each painting to them, getting more and more lost in the details.

Pete tried to look interested, but found himself looking at the grumpy Percy on Mr Byron’s arm rather than the paintings on the wall. Around every corner, he hoped to finally see the *Red Buffalo* but was disappointed every time.

The Second Investigator had almost given up hope when the host casually said: “—And in the next room is my Fortunard collection...”

Jupe and Pete were suddenly back on the ball. They eagerly followed Mr Byron to the next secured room.

In the centre of the small room stood a single armchair. Three paintings hung on the wall—one depicted a sleeping blue fox curled up in a hollow; another showed a group of green horses galloping wildly; and the third depicted a tropical island scenery. All three paintings were relatively small in size. Again, there was no sign of the *Red Buffalo*.

“Fortunard is my favourite of all,” Mr Byron continued his lecture. “He is often associated with ‘crazy-colour’ paintings—characterized by the use of vibrant, bold, and unconventional colour combinations, often presenting a sense of... excitement or even playful chaos. Look at this green in combination with the yellow sky... It always makes me go into raptures.

“It’s a shame that so many Fortunard paintings have been lost. There were three different versions of the *Island World*, for example...”—he pointed to the painting of the island scenery—“but the other two paintings were last seen about eighty years ago. They were lost

in the turmoil of the Second World War. Tragic, truly tragic. In any case, this is the most valuable part of my collection. It took years to bring these originals together.”

Jupiter and Pete found it difficult not to let their disappointment show. The First Investigator decided to give up the secrecy. “They really are very nice... but if I’m honest, we were hoping to see the *Red Buffalo*.”

There was a twitch in Byron’s face before he laughed out loud. “The *Red Buffalo*? The prices for such great works of art are staggering.”

“Indeed,” Jupiter confirmed. “Twenty million dollars, at the least—if I am not wrong.”

Mr Byron’s face twitched again. “How do you know that?”

“The painting was auctioned off for that price a few years ago. You can read about it everywhere.”

“Yes, of course.”

“We had speculated that you might have been the buyer.”

“I wish I were... but now maybe let’s talk about your article. What do you want to know?”

“Uh...” said Jupiter, stepping from one foot to the other, embarrassed. “First of all, I’d like to know... how should I put it... where the toilet is.”

Sylvester Byron smiled indulgently. “Down the stairs and then the second door on the left.”

“Thanks!” Jupiter gave Pete a barely perceptible nod.

The Second Investigator widened his eyes in horror. It was now his job to engage Mr Byron in a conversation about art as detailed as possible so that he won’t realize how long Jupiter would be gone. Percy stared at him darkly and challengingly.

“Yes, so, er...” the Second Investigator stammered, “which do you prefer—Expressionism or... er... the other?”

Mr Byron raised an eyebrow sceptically. “You mean Impressionism? Well, that’s a difficult question, you know...”

While Mr Byron launched into a lengthy monologue about the two styles, Pete’s gaze fell through the window into the garden outside. A man was walking towards the house with two full shopping bags.

Sylvester Byron noticed Pete’s gaze. “That’s Mr Kingsley, my cook. He’s coming to prepare my dinner... Where was I?”

... And so, Mr Byron rattled on, but Pete’s attention was elsewhere. He heard the front door open. Now the cook was inside. Jupiter could run into him at any time. Pete had to do something—perhaps create a diversionary manoeuvre... but what?

Silence spread through the room and Mr Byron looked at Pete expectantly. Apparently he had asked him a question.

“Er, yes,” Pete said blankly. “Expressionism, imperialism, it’s all really fascinating. I’m thinking about studying art history later, you know... or painting.”

“Before you apply for that course, you might want to remember that ‘imperialism’ has more to do with extending a country’s power and influence through colonization.” Byron’s scepticism was now abundantly clear. “So do you paint yourself?”

“Yes, portraits... in oil and... er... wax crayons.”

“What about your friend Jupiter? Does he paint too? Where is he anyway?”

“Maybe he got lost,” said Pete, turning around so abruptly that Percy flinched. “I’ll go look for him.”

6. Le Buffle Rouge

Bob was on his way to the desert with Alba. They had been travelling north on the Antelope Valley Freeway for an hour.

It had been pouring with rain the whole time. The windscreen wiper of the old Beetle squeaked frantically and barely kept up. There were reports on the radio of landslides and reservoirs threatening to overflow.

“The weather is getting worse and worse,” said Alba. “If it goes on like this, we’ll all be washed away.”

However, once they had gone past the mountain ranges that ran parallel to the coast, the bad weather stayed behind. Bob saw the sun for the first time in days. In the golden light of the late afternoon, the endless desert plain in which California City was located spread out before them. The view of the dry expanse was a relief after the constant rain.

California City was initially one big nothing. From the wide access road, a number of smaller roads branched off, but hardly any of them were built on. There were virtually no houses, no power lines, no road signs—nothing at all—just empty roads lined with sparse desert plants.

“Do you know California City?” asked Bob.

“No. Are we there yet? There’s nothing here.”

“The city is the result of a big mistake,” explained Bob. “In the 1950s, a property developer came up with the idea of buying a huge area of land. He wanted to build a city in the middle of the desert that would be as big as Los Angeles. Hundreds of roads were built and plots of land were subdivided. A few were also sold. Most, however, were not.

“The result is California City—now a desert ghost town. It is huge in terms of area, but it doesn’t even have as many residents as Rocky Beach. The founder of the city went bankrupt and what was left was a barely populated city centre and lots of empty space around it, carefully divided up by streets. Can you look up where Washington Street is?”

While Alba searched on her mobile phone, a few buildings appeared here and there. “Up ahead on the left.”

Bob drove through a maze of roads whose cracked surface was half blown over by the desert sand. He might as well have driven cross-country, because apart from a few knee-high bushes and a bit of rubble, there was nothing in the way.

Finally, he stopped in front of the only building on Washington Street. It was a nondescript house that stood on an otherwise empty and dry plot of land. It looked uninhabited. The curtains were drawn.

“So this is Washington Street, CC,” Bob said as he and Alba got out of the car.

“I’m pretty excited,” Alba confessed as they walked around the building. There was an empty waste container behind the building—nothing more.

A car approached from the north. They could already see the plume of dust it was dragging behind it from a distance. When the somewhat battered off-roader rolled onto Washington Street, the driver turned sharply and sped off across the landscape towards them.

“Is he crazy?” shouted Bob, startled.

The car braked hard and came to a halt two metres in front of them in a cloud of dust. The driver was a beefy man with a baseball cap and a stained T-shirt. He rolled down the window and waved in a friendly manner.

“Well, hello there!” the man called out to them. “So I wasn’t wrong this morning. You must be our new neighbours! Welcome to California City. I’m Bill.”

“We... er...” Alba stuttered.

“Uh... how are we neighbours?” Bob asked.

Bill laughed. “We are all neighbours here, even if we live a distance apart,” Bill explained. “See that lonely house back there by the water tower? That’s where my wife Eve and I live. Sorry, I’m in a bit of a hurry now, but Eve and I will drop by later for a beer, all right?”

Bill was about to drive off, but Bob held him back. “Just a minute, what do you mean you weren’t wrong this morning?”

“There was someone here this morning. I saw the motorbike—a dark blue one, right? I was about to jump in the car and say hello, but he was already gone. Sorry, I really have to go now. Have a good time shifting in!” He waved again and stepped on the accelerator. “Say hello to Marjorie for me!” With that, he sped off.

They looked helplessly at the trail of dust.

“Marjorie?” Bob wondered aloud in confusion.

“Obviously he thought we had bought this house,” said Alba.

“Yes,” Bob agreed, “but more importantly, our mysterious Batman was here.”

“Batman?” Alba was puzzled.

“Uh... I mean the motorcyclist who attempted to snatch your bag,” Bob clarified and realized that Jupe’s fears had come true. It was quite certain that Batman had overheard the clues from Rubbish-George. However, Bob decided not to mention this to Alba. “Anyway, I hope he didn’t find what he was looking for.”

Alba pulled the key out of her pocket. “We’d best take a look.”

“Be careful,” Bob said. “Your father warned you that it could be dangerous.”

Alba shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows what he meant by that? The house can’t really be a death trap.”

The key fitted and the door opened easily. They stepped inside.

Jupiter crept through the ground floor of Sylvester Byron’s villa in search of the *Red Buffalo*. Along the hallway, there were lower-valued paintings everywhere. Obviously the twenty-million-dollar *Red Buffalo* would not be among them.

Just then, the First Investigator came across a staircase leading downwards. Was this to the basement? He wanted to leave no stone unturned and descended the stairs.

Downstairs, he found a fitness room, another bathroom, a storeroom... and a fire-proof steel door with an identical numeric keypad on the side. The LED light was red, as expected.

“Let’s see if Mr Byron is one of those people who make it easy for themselves by assigning the same code for all doors.”

On the keypad, he entered four digits. The little LED light switched from red to green. Jupiter smiled with satisfaction and opened the door.

The room behind it was windowless. When Jupiter entered, spotlights automatically flashed on. They were focussed on the painting on the wall—the *Red Buffalo*!

The ‘crazy colours’ in the painting shone vibrantly. Seeing the work of art in its original form impressed Jupiter more than he had expected. Enthralled, he stepped closer to look at

the texture of the painting. There was probably an anti-theft device on the frame, so he definitely didn't want to touch it.

Suddenly, he heard a short beep.

"Oh no!" he thought to himself. "Don't tell me that I've triggered a motion sensor!"

The very next moment, an alarm shrilled through the house.

Instinctively, Jupe ran out of the room and closed the door. Before he could turn around, a hand grabbed his left shoulder. Then, something was rammed into the back of his knees, causing him to buckle and fall to the ground. The next moment, the First Investigator was lying on his stomach, his face pressed against the cold stone floor, and his hands twisted behind his back. It had happened so quickly that he hadn't even been able to yell out—not that anybody could have heard him over the loud alarm.

On the first floor, Mr Byron and Pete flinched at the loud alarm.

"That damned alarm system's acting up again," said Mr Byron, pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket. "I'll take care of it in a moment." He tapped something on his mobile phone and the next moment, the alarm stopped.

Now they heard excited shouting: "Mr Byron! Mr Byron, come quickly! There's a burglar!"

"What the—" Sylvester Byron startled and ran out of the room. Pete followed him.

In the basement at the steel door, they saw the cook, who was pressing his knee into the small of Jupiter's back and holding his arms tightly.

"I don't know what happened, Mr Byron. I was just down here to get some supplies and saw this door open. I thought it was you, but then suddenly there was this guy coming out."

Mr Byron's face darkened. He glared at Pete. "Do you want to explain this to me before or after I've called the police?"

"Did my father really live here?" Alba mumbled as she looked around.

The house was largely empty. It consisted of a large living area with a kitchenette. It was only furnished with a dining table and two chairs. A door led into a bedroom. Here too, there was only a simple bed and a wardrobe. Another door led outside onto a concreted area that had probably once been a terrace. Now, only the empty waste container was there. There was a layer of dust on everything.

"It looks more like a shelter to me," Bob remarked, "as if your father had to go into hiding or something. I wonder if the warning in his tape message referred to this house at all. It doesn't seem dangerous to me. It also doesn't strike me as the kind of place where you'd safely keep a painting worth millions of dollars."

"Maybe there's a secret hiding place here," Alba mused.

Bob looked around carefully. "The layer of dust on the floor is smudged, and it looks pretty fresh. Apparently Batman really was in here. I also noticed that the door lock doesn't look like it's been broken into. Could he have a key to this place?"

"Well, this key was with me all the time," Alba said. "Maybe he had a key himself."

"—Or he could have just picked the lock..." Bob added, and then something struck him. Batman could have heard the two clues Rubbish-George told Jupe—"California City" and the "House of Roaring Waters"—but how did he know about "Washington Street" which was written on the key tag that Alba had? Otherwise, could this house be the House of Roaring Waters? In the desert?

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "At least it's not difficult to find out what he's been up to here."

They followed the tracks into the bedroom, where they led to under the bed. Bob got down on his knees and tapped the floor.

"It sounds hollow here!" He pushed the bed to one side. One of the laminate floorboards was loose. Someone had prised at the joints with a sharp tool. Bob pulled the piece out. There was a cavity underneath.

"It's a secret hiding place, but it's too small for a painting," Bob remarked. His fingers got hold of a small cardboard box. Bob expected it to be empty but something rattled inside. He stood up and handed it to Alba. "I think you deserve the honour."

Alba swallowed and opened the box. Inside was a notebook. She opened it. There were only about ten pages. She frowned and browsed through the pages. Bob tried to catch a glimpse.

"To be honest, it doesn't mean anything to me," Alba said. "Can you do anything with it?"

Bob took the book with curiosity. It was a list of names and addresses, written in fine, cursive handwriting. A date and a price were also noted here and there. They were sums in the millions. There was also something in a foreign language next to each name. It was French, and although Bob couldn't speak the language, he recognized a few words.

Slowly, very slowly, it dawned on him what he was looking at. An entry on the fourth page turned his hunch into certainty. It read:

Sylvester Byron, Mandeville Canyon—Le buffle rouge—\$20,000,000.

Mr Byron did not call the police, although he threatened to do so more than once. With a grim face, he wanted to listen to what the boys had to say.

They were sitting in the kitchen, where Mr Kingsley was fiddling with vegetables, a redfish and a very sharp knife. They were all aware that he was listening to the conversation as intently as he was carving the fish. Only Percy was no longer interested in the two investigators. The redfish took up all his attention.

"First and foremost, tell me how you managed to open that secured door?" Mr Byron asked.

"The green light was on," Jupiter lied. "It was already unlocked."

"It cannot be," the host insisted. "I do not leave it unlocked unless I am in there."

"Anyway, that was what I saw," Jupe said.

"I'll have to call my security company to do a thorough check on the system," Mr Byron decided. "Now I'll give you a chance to explain what you were up to, and you'd better come clean with me."

The First Investigator decided not to withhold information and told the whole story.

"Why didn't you tell me what it was about from the start?" Mr Byron asked.

"—Because we didn't know whether you would admit to owning the *Red Buffalo*," explained Jupiter. "It was only our assumption that the painting belonged to you. You bought the painting anonymously at an auction for twenty million dollars and you had good reason to keep your most valuable possession a secret."

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"We couldn't predict how you would react."

"—And you thought it would be a good idea to tell me a school magazine story and snoop around my house in secret?"

“There was no malicious intent behind it,” Pete assured him. “We want to help you.”

“Help me?” Mr Byron repeated scornfully. “Help me with what? The *Red Buffalo* is perfectly secured.”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “Well, at least I helped test your security system.”

“Thank you for that,” Mr Byron quipped. “Coming back to that person, that Juárez—whom I’ve never heard of, by the way—did it ever occur to you that he might have just cooked up some story?”

“Absolutely,” Jupiter agreed, “but that’s why we’re here—to find out.”

“There’s nothing to find out. I think the rest of the story is a load of rubbish. You say that in the message to his daughter, Juárez claimed that the painting wasn’t here in Mandeville Canyon, but it is. Do you know what I think? The poor man was not quite sane in the last days of his life. He’s deluded, so to speak. I am touched by your concern and I believe you that you meant me no harm, but think a bit more carefully about what you do in future, otherwise it will end badly.”

Mr Byron took a deep breath. “Mr Kingsley has turned on the cooker, which means my dinner will be ready in ten minutes. So if you’ll excuse me, I’ve had enough for today.” He stood up and waved his hand unceremoniously.

“One more thing...”—his voice had a warning edge to it—“I hope I can rely on you to handle this matter with discretion.”

“Of course, Mr Byron,” Jupiter assured him. “No one will find out about your treasure from us.”

“Mr Kingsley, be so good as to show the young gentlemen out.”

“Thank you for the tour,” said Pete meekly. “It really was very interesting.”

“You can write an article for your school magazine—about immoralism.” Shaking his head, Byron left the kitchen.

7. Another Source of Information

Shortly afterwards, Jupiter and Pete were out of the villa, making their way back to the pick-up.

“Jupe, I don’t believe for a second that the *Red Buffalo* room was unlocked.”

“You’re right, Pete. I unlocked it.”

“How did you know the access code?”

“Observation, my dear friend,” Jupe replied cockily. “I observed Byron keying the code in an earlier room... with the help of a massive sneeze.”

“You mean you managed to see the code from a distance.”

“Not really... I just observed his finger movements... a few times, in fact. It helped when the four digits matched his date of birth which Bob had found out earlier in his research.”

“You sly fox... but you didn’t manage to evade the motion sensor.”

“You can’t win all the time...”

“Well, I think we did not achieve much in this operation,” said Pete.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Jupiter disagreed. “At least we now know that Mr Byron really is the owner of the *Red Buffalo*. Juárez claimed otherwise.”

“So that’s a lie. The painting is obviously not in danger. That means that we no longer have a case, am I right?”

“Don’t be so hasty, Pete,” warned Jupiter. “There’s something wrong here. Why would Juárez tell his daughter a lie? I have a feeling there’s more to it than that. We should make an effort to decipher Señor Juárez’s motives.”

“Decipher all you want. Right now, I want to get back to the salvage yard so I can take care of my car. I have to take it to the workshop today.”

“You and your MG.”

“And you... with your obsession with mysteries!”

Just then, Jupiter’s mobile rang. It was Bob.

“Bob, what’s up? ... What’s that? You’ve found something?” The First Investigator listened to Bob’s discovery. “Thanks, Bob, this information came at just the right moment. I’ll see you later at Headquarters!” Then he hung up.

“What happened?” asked Pete.

“Bob came across something, and I’ve just realized why Juárez was so concerned about the safety of the *Red Buffalo*. He wasn’t lying. It all makes perfect sense! Come on, Pete, we have to go back to Mr Byron!”

“What makes perfect sense?” asked Mr Byron, standing in the doorway, glancing indignantly at his watch. “You’ve got six minutes, because it’s about time for my dinner.”

“I won’t even need a minute,” Jupiter promised. “It’s quite simple—the *Red Buffalo* in your possession is a forgery.”

Mr Byron laughed. “I beg your pardon? Can you believe that? I bought the painting at a reputable auction house. Of course, experts were appointed to confirm the authenticity of the painting.”

"I'm not saying you bought a forgery. The genuine one must have been replaced with a forgery. That's why Señor Juárez claimed it wasn't in Mandeville Canyon."

"—But that's nonsense. It's utter nonsense!"

"Check it out," Jupiter demanded.

Mr Byron blinked indignantly and Pete gave the First Investigator a warning look.

"Check it, please," Jupiter repeated a little more politely. "You still have five minutes."

For a moment, it looked as if Mr Byron was going to slam the door in their faces.

However, he turned around so abruptly that Percy hissed briefly on his arm. As he walked back into the house, the two boys remained standing at the door, not sure what to do.

"What are you two waiting for?" Mr Byron called out over his shoulder. "The clock is ticking!"

They followed him down to the basement. At the keypad, Mr Byron entered the access code, pushed open the door, and went in first. He turned around and raised his hand to do something. This was followed by a short beep. Jupiter figured that the host had just deactivated the motion sensor.

"There it is," said Mr Byron indignantly, pointing to the bottom right corner of the painting. "'F. Fortunard'—that's how he signed each of his paintings."

"The signature could easily be forged," interjected the First Investigator.

"—But it's not."

"How do you know that?"

"—Because nobody could have changed the painting, darn it!"

"Let me put it to you in another way..." Jupiter said. "What else do you know about the painting—for instance, any peculiarities or defects that are not obvious? Something that only an expert could tell?"

Sylvester Byron huffed. "In fact, I do. There is a small chip in the paint around the top-right edge. It's hidden under the frame. Nobody knows about it."

"Show it to us."

"I'll do that on one condition. After that, you'll go away and never show your face here again."

"Agreed," said Jupiter.

Mr Byron put his cat down and took the frame off the wall. He then placed the frame on a side table and carefully removed the painting.

"Here you go," he said triumphantly as he turned the painting in their direction and looked at it himself from above. "The small chip in the top right-hand corner—" He broke off. His eyes widened and he involuntarily took a step back. In doing so, he startled his cat. Percy dashed out of the room in disgust. Sylvester Byron didn't even notice.

"Can you believe it?" he croaked.

"Mr Byron, your dinner's ready!" shouted Mr Kingsley from upstairs.

"Keep it warm," Byron replied tonelessly and so quietly that the cook couldn't possibly hear. "I'll eat later... much later..."

"So was it really a forgery?" Bob asked when the three of them were gathered back at Headquarters.

On the way back from California City, he had dropped Alba off at her motel, even though she would have liked to continue following him. Bob had been able to talk her out of it. A client interested in the progress of the investigation was all well and good, but meetings at Headquarters were reserved for The Three Investigators.

“Mr Byron bought the genuine painting with a blemish on it—a small chip on the paint at the top-right corner,” Jupiter confirmed. “The painting currently in his possession is flawless... and thanks to your discovery in California City, it’s also clear how Night Shadow knew about the buyer of the painting in the first place—from the notebook.”

“The entries in the notebook are in French,” Bob clarified as he showed his friends the notebook. “My knowledge of French is limited, but I can make a few things out. The book lists a whole series of well-known paintings, including the names and addresses of the current owners. In some cases, the amount paid at the last sale is written next to it.”

“I bet it’s Hugenay’s notebook!” Pete blurted out. “That’s obvious. You really were right, Juve. Hugenay has a hand in this painting.”

“Looks like it.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully as his expression darkened.

Bob and Pete exchanged glances. Whenever it came to Hugenay, Jupiter reacted grimly. He got played badly by the master thief before. From the very beginning, it had been a kind of competition between the two to see who was the smarter, and who could see through the other’s plans more quickly. The last time they met in the *Fire Moon* case, Jupiter had done everything he could to put Hugenay behind bars. He had succeeded.

The Three Investigators had also uncovered Hugenay’s well-kept family secret—he was the son of a very famous painter, but hardly anyone knew that. Of all people, The Three Investigators were now part of a very small circle of insiders. Since Victor Hugenay was in prison, the rivalry between Jupiter and him was history, and the issue was over—at least that was what Bob and Pete thought.

“Juárez must have stolen Hugenay’s notebook. We already know that he wanted to get into art theft himself. A list like this—presumably the result of years of research—is of course an excellent start, and Mr Byron was a victim with his *Red Buffalo*.” Jupiter tapped the notebook page on which ‘*Le buffle rouge*’ was neatly written.

“—But Hugenay must have noticed the theft of the notebook,” Bob interjected.

The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe he did, and he probably intended to get it back but before that could happen, we got in the way, and they were both arrested.”

“So Juárez must have swapped the *Red Buffalo* shortly beforehand,” Bob pondered further. “How did he manage that?”

“Mr Byron suspects that it happened during the maintenance of the security system. Perhaps Juárez somehow infiltrated the team responsible. The time period would certainly fit. He then took the painting to a hiding place before he was arrested. So we now have to find this hiding place.”

“—But Alba and you found it,” Pete objected. “It’s just that Batman was quicker.”

Bob shook his head. “I don’t think the painting was in that house in California City. Firstly, the house wasn’t secured at all—even I could have picked the front door lock. Secondly, the tracks on the floor led straight to the secret compartment under the bed and nowhere else... but the Fortunard couldn’t have fitted in that small compartment.”

“So there must be another hiding place,” Jupiter concluded. “Batman didn’t take the notebook with him, which seems strange to me and this only allows one conclusion to be drawn...”

“There was something else in the house,” Bob continued the thought. “—Possibly a clue to the hiding place of the painting... and that’s all Batman was really interested in.”

“That means he’s still one step ahead of us,” Pete suggested.

“We should have reacted right away last night and gone to California City,” Jupiter grumbled. “We really are three idiots.”

“Leave Bob and me out of this,” Pete countered. “You’re the one who didn’t make that decision.”

“What should we do now?” asked Bob.

“We have to find out more about Night Shadow,” Jupiter decided. “That’s the only option we have. If the situation really was what we think it was, Batman could even have found the Fortunard by now.”

“—And how are we supposed to find out more?” asked Pete. “Talk to Rubbish again?”

“I don’t think that will help. No, I think the time has come to get in touch with our other source of information.”

“We have another source of information?”

“That’s right, Pete.”

It took Pete a second to realize what Jupiter was thinking. Suddenly, his eyes widened. “You want to talk to Hugenay? Are you sure? I mean...”

“What do you mean?” Jupe asked.

“Well, don’t tell me that you want to get into such a situation again. The last time you tangled with him, you got pretty carried away...”

“Don’t be silly, Pete. The score with Hugenay has long since been settled. There’s no need to get carried away with anything. We got him put in prison and he’s still there.”

“You said it—we got him put in prison,” Bob said, “so why would he help us with our case now?”

“—So that I will continue to keep his family secret to myself.”

“What?” Pete exclaimed. “You want to reveal that Hugenay is really the son of... the son of Jean-Marie Jaccard? ... That’s blackmail!”

“I don’t want to reveal it,” Jupiter countered, smiling thoughtfully. “—But I could keep him guessing whether I intend to or not.”

Cotta was in a good mood. The police inspector at the Rocky Beach Police Department, who had often assisted The Three Investigators in their cases, was sitting at his desk the next morning, whistling happily and tidying up piles of paper.

When Jupiter, Pete and Bob entered his office, he didn’t even pause, but immediately said: “I’m not responsible for what you did or what you are going to do.”

“Good morning, Inspector,” Jupiter replied. “You don’t even know why we’ve come.”

“—And I don’t want to know, because as I said, I’m not responsible for anything you’re involved in. My long fishing weekend starts in two hours. Whatever you want, contact my colleagues.”

“Our request will cost you no more than five minutes of your time,” Jupiter promised.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll give you a minute to say it, even though that may not mean I will do anything.”

“It’s about Victor Hugenay.”

Now Cotta paused. “The Victor Hugenay?”

“How many Victor Hugenays do you know, Inspector?”

“Don’t get cheeky with me, Mr Sherlock Jones. What’s it about?”

“A valuable painting,” Bob took over.

“Of course.”

“It’s been stolen.”

“So what?”

“Hugenay may have some information that will help us,” Jupe said. “We need to talk to him.”

“Sounds very much like a case for you three, but what have I got to do with it? Just go sign up for a visit to the prison.”

“We tried that this morning,” Jupiter explained, “but it’s not that easy to get a visit appointment at short notice. You have to apply for something first, and that takes a few days.”

“Then you just wait.”

“That’s not possible,” Pete argued. “Time is pressing. The *Red Buffalo* is in danger.”

“Wait a minute!” Cotta stumbled. “The *Red Buffalo*? The famous painting by Fortunard?”

“That tells you something, huh?” Pete marvelled.

Cotta looked at him grimly. “As it happens, yes, Pete Crenshaw. Even policemen have a tiny bit of general knowledge, although of course only to a very limited extent. So, are you serious? The *Red Buffalo* was stolen?”

The three nodded in unison and Cotta glanced at his watch. “I’ll give you five minutes to tell me.”

Now they had his undivided attention.

“I can’t believe it,” Cotta said when he had heard all the details. “The *Red Buffalo*—one of the most famous paintings in the world. You three rascals do not get involved in anything smaller than this, do you?”

He began to massage his temples. “I can still remember Hugenay’s arrest very well. I was besieged by the press and the authorities couldn’t agree on who should, could, may, or must convict and imprison him. I was in a lot of trouble. After the matter had finally moved from my desk to another one, I vowed never to deal with Victor Hugenay again.”

“You don’t have to deal with him,” Jupiter promised. “It would be enough for us if you could use your influence and arrange a visit for us at short notice.”

Cotta looked at his watch and nodded. “All right then. I’ll get in touch with the prison administration. After that, I’m off... and by that, I mean whatever happens, you leave me alone and contact my colleagues. Is that clear? Good. Now get out! I’ve got work to do.” Cotta waved his hand impatiently.

The Three Investigators drove back to the salvage yard and returned to fixing the bikes for the children’s home.

To their surprise, an hour later, Jupe’s mobile phone rang, and he answered it. He listened attentively, and after about a minute, he hung up.

“That was Cotta,” Jupiter said to his two friends. “Knock the rust off your trousers, fellas. We have an appointment with Victor Hugenay in just over an hour!”

8. Face-to-Face with Hugenay

A little late, The Three Investigators entered the building complex of the California State Prison in Lancaster—a city located between Rocky Beach and California City.

The entrance area could hardly be surpassed in desolation. There were a few uncomfortable chairs and a coffee machine on the streaky linoleum floor. Next to it was a house plant clinging desperately to its last green leaf.

“I’ve been thinking again, Jupe,” said Pete anxiously. “You mustn’t reveal Hugenay’s secret. You promised him.”

“Pete, I never said that I would—”

“You shouldn’t threaten him with it either. Who knows how he’ll react?”

“Can I help you?” Behind the thick armoured glass of the reception desk, a uniformed woman looked over at them. On her white shirt was a name tag that read ‘Lt J Rosner’.

“We have a visit appointment,” Bob replied.

“You’re late,” Lieutenant Rosner said. “Visiting hours have already started.”

“We came as fast as we could,” Bob explained.

The lieutenant checked her computer. “Okay, which one of you is Jupiter Jones?”

“I am,” the First Investigator said and raised his hand.

“Okay, show me your ID before I can allow you in,” the lieutenant said. “The two of you can wait here.”

“Just him?” Pete asked in surprise. “Why is that?”

“—Because he’s the only one registered,” Lieutenant Rosner explained. “Visit for Victor Hugenay, express authorization, three o’clock today—Jupiter Jones. First things first—let me have your ID.”

A steel drawer popped out below the armoured glass and Jupiter put his driver’s licence inside. The drawer was pulled out to the other side. Lieutenant Rosner looked at the licence carefully, compared the photo with Jupiter’s face, and keyed something into the computer system. Then Jupe’s driver’s licence came back the same way.

“All right,” Lieutenant Rosner said. “You can go through.”

“I don’t like this,” muttered Pete. “You all alone with Hugenay...”

“Relax, Pete, I’ll manage.” Jupiter laughed and pretended not to be nervous. “We’re in a prison here. What’s going to happen?”

Lieutenant Rosner cleared her throat audibly. “You are here on express authorization, so are you in a hurry or not?”

The First Investigator nodded.

“Oh yeah...” Lieutenant Rosner added. “No electronic or communication devices allowed in there, so you might as well leave them with your friends out here.”

Jupe handed his mobile phone to Pete before stepping through the revolving screen door which could only be passed in one direction. Next, he went through a walk-through metal detector like that in an airport. A uniformed man was waiting for him on the other side with a hand-held metal detector wand to scan the First Investigator. Satisfied, the man directed Jupe to another revolving door.

The First Investigator followed a long corridor leading to the visitors' room. Another prison officer was waiting at the door. Jupiter's identity was checked again, before the officer opened the door and directed the First Investigator in.

In the windowless visitors' room, Jupiter looked around curiously. Stretching from one end of the room to the other was a row of open booths, each separated from the adjacent by wooden walls. Each booth had, at desk height, a counter surface, and above it was a soundproof pane of armoured glass. At each counter were one or two chairs for visitors, and on the other side of the pane was a chair for the inmate. This set-up facilitated a private face-to-face conversation between visitors and an inmate via a telephone intercom handset, with the pane serving as a barrier to prevent contact between them.

There were three prison guards positioned on the visitors' side of the room, and one of them directed the First Investigator to a booth with an empty seat. Jupiter walked there and sat down.

Victor Hugenay had hardly changed. The tall, wiry Frenchman still had his pencil-thin moustache and was immaculately clean-shaven. However, he had had to swap his tailor-made suit for ill-fitting prisoner's garb made of grey cotton. A delighted smile played around his mouth.

Hugenay picked up the handset on his side and nodded to Jupiter, inviting him to do the same.

"Good afternoon, my friend Jupiter Jones!" Hugenay's voice was as friendly and open as ever. "What an unexpected surprise. When you were announced as a visitor earlier, I could hardly believe it. You haven't changed at all."

"Good afternoon, Mr Hugenay," Jupiter replied and suddenly, he had a kind of blackout—a blankness in his head as if he had forgotten why he was here in the first place, especially with Victor Hugenay sitting face-to-face in front of him.

This was the first time they had seen each other in a long time. It wasn't that Jupiter was afraid of him. Hugenay was not a threatening man, on the contrary. He was actually very polite, but he radiated a strange kind of superiority that immediately put the First Investigator on high alert. However at the moment, there could be no question of superiority—the master thief was behind bars.

Nevertheless, Jupiter could not shake off the feeling that he had to be on his guard. He was annoyed by his sudden speechlessness. What was wrong with him? He felt like a rabbit in front of a snake. Pull yourself together, Jupiter Jones!

"Have you lost your tongue?" Hugenay asked.

"Not at all," Jupe replied. "You haven't changed much either."

"It's nice that you're here, Jupiter. I was hoping you'd visit me one day—not expecting, but hoping. I'm sure you had good reasons not to, just as I'm sure you have a good reason for being here today. However, before you tell me, may I speak first? I want to tell you something and I've been waiting a long time for an opportunity. It's important to me. Please give me a minute."

The First Investigator felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He nodded.

"I've had plenty of time to think about it. For a while, I have tried to persuade you to abandon your path of virtue. I have seen in you a kindred spirit—someone who might one day take up my legacy. You have an alert, razor-sharp mind called to greatness but... I know by now that you will never become... well... a master thief. It was wishful thinking. You're too righteous and too honest for that. I won't try to stand in your way again."

Jupiter hadn't expected such an opening. He didn't know what to say in reply. Fortunately, Hugenay didn't seem to be expecting an answer.

“Now for you,” he said cheerfully. “What’s the reason for your visit?”

The First Investigator straightened up and squared his shoulders. No more beating around the bush. He had a case to solve. “I have a question for you. It’s about Javier Juárez—Night Shadow.”

“Ah... that unpleasant person. I’ve heard that he has passed away. One shouldn’t be happy about someone’s death but Señor Juárez made my life extremely difficult. Ultimately, he robbed me of my freedom. I had misjudged him at the time and he betrayed me—one of my few mistakes... So what about him?”

“He had a daughter. Did you know that?”

“Of course I did. I’ve always tried to find out as much as possible about the people I work with. However, as far as I know, the two had no contact with each other for a long time.”

“That’s what I heard as well... but he left her something—a secret message.”

“How did you know about it?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Secret messages have a certain tendency to end up with the three of us.”

Hugenay nodded. “Yes, I have to agree with that.”

“Juárez’s daughter asked us to help her decode the message. That led us to Juárez’s secret hideout.”

“Which of his secret hideouts?”

“He had several?”

“He was involved in all kinds of dangerous business, of course, he had to have more than one hideout.”

“—And you know his hideouts?”

“I don’t know all of them... only a few.”

“It’s a house in a secluded location,” Jupiter said hesitantly. He wanted to find out how much Hugenay actually knew.

“Hmm... you don’t want to tell me outright,” Hugenay guessed. “That’s understandable. All right, I’ll make a guess... Is it in the desert?”

The First Investigator nodded.

“Is that house in California City?”

Jupiter couldn’t hide his surprise. “That’s correct.”

“—And what else? Has he hidden any loot from his raids there?” Hugenay asked, but Jupiter hesitated, wondering what he should and should not say.

Hugenay casually glanced at the clock on the wall. “By the way, I’d love to talk to you all day, but for your information, visiting hours are limited to one hour and you were late. We don’t have much time left.”

Jupiter reached into his jacket pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the security guard next to the door taking notice of him. However, when Jupiter simply pulled out a notebook, the guard immediately relaxed.

“This was in the house in California City.”

Hugenay’s eyes widened. “That’s mine.” There was a brief falter, a slight uncertainty in his voice. For some reason, it made Jupiter feel more confident.

“That’s what we suspected.”

It took Hugenay a moment to regain his composure. “I assume you’ve found out what it is.”

“A to-do list.”

“That’s saying as if it’s a list of common everyday activities.”

"It was your common everyday activity to... uh... acquire works of art."

"All right, then... if that's how you describe it—*une liste de choses à faire*. I knew Night Shadow had tricked me. However, until just now, I had no idea how far he'd gone. Apparently, it wasn't just me who knew about his secret hideouts—he knew about mine too."

"Your little beach house near Malibu?" Jupiter surmised.

Hugenay nodded.

"Señor Juárez must have tracked it down. While you were in prison and he was still at large, he apparently put that week to good use and took care of the *Red Buffalo*."

"The *Red Buffalo*?"

"He stole the painting and replaced it with a forgery. I assume that a week is not enough time to make a convincing forgery of an old oil painting. I therefore assume that you might have something to do with it."

"Really?" Hugenay said. "That's interesting..."

"I remember you saying at the time that you had been in the area for a while. That leads to the conclusion that you were actually in California because of the *Red Buffalo*. The *Fire Moon* thing sort of came in between. Your original plan was to... uh... acquire the Fortunard. Am I right?"

"I have to admit that you have a remarkable gift for making logical connections from very little information."

"I'll take that as affirmation," Jupiter said with satisfaction. "You wanted to take the *Red Buffalo*, but Juárez did that instead, and now the painting is in danger of being stolen once again."

"Stolen once again? What do you mean by that?"

"It wasn't in California City. We assume that Night Shadow had hidden it somewhere else. During our investigations, an unknown person has also got in the way. This stranger may now be on the verge of tracking down the Fortunard's hiding place."

"—And you don't know this hiding place," Hugenay surmised.

"No... that's why I'm here."

"You think I know it?"

"It was my hope, yes... So... do you know it?"

Hugenay raised his shoulders helplessly. "I don't know, and it's hard for me to check from here."

"You can leave the checking to us. You tell us which places you think are possibilities, and we'll check."

The master thief smiled. "—But why, my dear Jupiter, should I do that? What would I gain from it?"

So there it was, the question that Bob had already seen coming. Jupiter hesitated. Should he do what Pete had warned him against? Should he threaten to reveal Hugenay's secret? Then he would be breaking the promise he had once made to Hugenay. The master thief knew all this. He probably even suspected that Jupiter was thinking about this possibility at that moment and seemed to be waiting for it.

The First Investigator wrestled with himself for a moment before making a decision. "I can't offer you anything for your help, Mr Hugenay, nor will I threaten you. Therefore, you have nothing to gain—except to help save a famous and very valuable painting."

Hugenay nodded and smiled with satisfaction. "Thank you for your candour. I will help you—as you put it—to save a famous and very valuable painting. We'll see what I can get out of it in the end."

"So what can you tell me?" Jupiter asked.

Hugenay's gaze wandered to the clock on the wall. "Visiting hours are very strict here. I know a lot about Señor Juárez... but if you have a clue, we'll save precious time."

Jupiter decided to give Hugenay the benefit of the doubt. "The House of Roaring Waters. Does that mean anything to you?"

Hugenay's facial expression changed abruptly. All of a sudden he looked alarmed. "Indeed it does. Where did you get that name?"

"We came across it in the course of our investigation... You seem worried."

The master thief furrowed his eyebrows. "The House of Roaring Waters is one of Night Shadow's hideouts—a place that is best not entered unprepared. It is equipped with a number of traps that can prove fatal to a careless visitor. The place is dangerous if you don't know how to get around it."

Jupiter's heart beat faster. This was identical to what Juárez had said in the tape message!

"—And if the *Red Buffalo* is there, then it is going to face another bigger danger..."

Hugenay continued, "but at the time of his death, Juárez could not have known how imminent this danger would be."

"Mr Hugenay, you're talking in riddles."

"Now, it's not just the traps that pose the danger. It's the destruction of the place. If the Fortunard painting is not recovered as soon as possible, it will be destroyed forever."

9. A Serious Mistake?

The sound of a shrill bell made the First Investigator flinch.

“Visiting hours are over,” the guard announced. “I must now ask you to leave the visitors’ room.”

Jupiter ignored him. “What do you mean by it being ‘destroyed forever’?”

“I mean that the hiding place itself is under threat... and so is the painting.”

“Under threat by what? And how did Juárez know about it?”

“I’m sure he was aware of the threat, but not the seriousness of it.”

“Mr Hugenay, you’re still talking in riddles. How could Juárez not know anything about the seriousness of the threat, but you do?”

“—Because I listen to the radio—”

“By the way, young friend,” the guard behind Jupiter sharply interrupted the conversation. “Your time here is up.”

Jupiter then noticed that all the other visitors had already risen from their chairs and were gradually leaving the room. Apparently the rules here were very strict indeed.

“Just a moment,” Jupiter requested.

The guard shook his head. “Certainly not.”

“Mr Hugenay, where is this hiding place?”

Hugenay moved his lips, but Jupiter didn’t hear the answer as the phone line was promptly disconnected.

When the master thief realized this, he hung up the handset with a regretful shrug of his shoulders. He rose from his chair, nodded to Jupiter once more and turned to one of the guards standing on his side of the armoured glass.

Jupiter couldn’t hear what was being said, but the guard seemed to agree with Hugenay’s question or request. The guard escorted Hugenay out of the visitors’ room and into a corridor. Jupiter could see a row of telephones hanging on the wall. Hugenay headed for one of them.

“What does all this mean?” asked Pete. “What’s the threat to the hiding place? And what did Hugenay mean when he said he listened to the radio?”

The Three Investigators were standing in the prison visitors’ car park. It was raining, but they didn’t even notice. Bob and Pete were bursting with curiosity.

“I don’t know any more than what I’ve just told you, Pete.”

“—But you must have some idea.”

Jupiter lifted his shoulders helplessly. “Hugenay knows about the House of Roaring Waters.”

“—But he didn’t tell you where it was,” Bob mused.

“No. He just told me that it was a dangerous place. I was then forced to leave as the visiting hours were over.”

“What a daft arrangement,” said Pete. “We need to reschedule another visit immediately. Call Cotta and tell him to take care of it.”

“That might not be necessary. Hugenay asked the security guard for something when he left the visitors’ room. He was then escorted to a telephone. I hope he called Headquarters

and left a message.”

“Well, why don’t you access our answering machine remotely and check?” Bob suggested.

“Yes, I’ll wait a while and do it from the car on the way back,” Juve said. “Let’s go!”

They got back into the Beetle and Bob drove off. Ten minutes later, Jupiter used his mobile phone to call their answering machine at Headquarters. He entered the password to access the messages and listened on.

“There was no call from Hugenay after all,” he finally reported. “Strange... he was on the phone. I thought...” The First Investigator fell silent. He stared into space for a few seconds. “Fellas, I have a dark suspicion... I could have made a serious mistake.”

“A mistake?” Pete didn’t know what Jupiter meant.

“What if Hugenay called someone else?”

It dawned on Bob. “You mean... an accomplice?”

“I let him in on everything we know because since he was behind bars, I thought he wouldn’t be able to do anything with our information. It didn’t occur to me that there might be people on the outside who could help him... and that he’s allowed to make phone calls to these people.”

“Aren’t such phone calls monitored?” asked Pete.

“I have no idea. Maybe he’s developed a secret code. He could have passed on all kinds of information that way.”

“Goodness!” Pete gasped.

“If Hugenay now knows where the painting is thanks to your tips, and he has just passed this information on to an accomplice, then the painting is even more in danger now,” said Bob.

“I’ll call Cotta. He has to arrange for me to speak to Hugenay again. I hope the inspector is still in his office.”

Jupiter called the Rocky Beach Police Department, but Cotta was not there. Then he tried the inspector’s mobile phone but the call was not answered.

“Hopeless...” Jupiter grumbled. “Cotta’s colleagues will never help us. I just can’t believe something so stupid!” He had a great desire to kick something. “We have to get ahead of Hugenay. We have to be quicker than his accomplice.”

“Yes, but how?” asked Pete. “How are we supposed to find the House of Roaring Waters?”

“Rubbish-George,” said Jupiter firmly. “We’ve got to get to him!”

On reaching Rocky Beach, Bob drove straight to the harbour. There was the small houseboat where Rubbish-George lived when he wasn’t wandering around somewhere else.

However, at this time, Bob spotted a thick padlock on the door on deck. “Looks like he’s not here.”

Rubbish didn’t have a mobile phone. Unless they found him here or bumped into him on the street, there was no way of contacting him.

“No Rubbish-George,” Jupiter stated. “No Cotta... Apparently everyone’s been keeping away from us. Do you know where Cotta usually goes on his fishing holidays?”

“You don’t want to go there,” Bob argued. “He’ll rip your head off!”

“Do you know or not?”

“I don’t know.”

Now Jupiter did kick something—a wooden pole sticking out of the water right by the pier. “Fellas, I hate to say it, but we’re stuck.”

The three returned to Headquarters. Jupiter’s mood was so gloomy that Pete and Bob soon left for home. Jupiter remained stubbornly seated at his desk, racking his brains for ways to locate Rubbish-George or the House of Roaring Waters.

Somewhere out there, either Hugenay’s accomplice or the mysterious Batman might have reached the *Red Buffalo*’s hiding place already. And why? Because Jupiter Jones had messed up, and there was nothing he could do but sit here and tear himself apart.

It was already past 11 pm when the ringing of the phone snapped him out of his seething thoughts. A call at this time of night could only mean something very good... or something very bad.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“What have you done again, you three dreadful pests?” It was Inspector Cotta.

“Inspector! What—”

“Save your surprise for another time! I was already at my holiday cottage. I was just about to put my mobile phone in flight mode for good—when a call came.”

“My phone call?”

“No, yours came earlier and I promptly ignored it. However, I couldn’t do the same to a call from the chief of police himself. He said I was the only person from Rocky Beach Police Department who ‘knows all about this Hugenay thing’—as if that was my speciality! Also, I was the only one who could attend to this matter at such short notice. After all, I had done it back then. So I had to turn around right away. I didn’t even spend five minutes at my holiday cottage!”

“Sir, I don’t understand what—”

“‘An emergency,’ he said, and that ‘we had to act immediately, otherwise it wouldn’t reflect well on the police’. Can you explain that to me? What did you discuss with Mr Master Thief, for goodness’ sake?”

“I told him that we have an idea about the whereabouts of the *Red Buffalo*. As a result, he was quite alarmed.”

“So alarmed that he immediately called his lawyer?”

“His... lawyer?” Jupiter hadn’t expected that. So it was not an accomplice after all.

“That’s right. The lawyer in turn contacted the district attorney’s office and they spoke to the chief of police, and now everyone is beside themselves with excitement because this painting has to be saved, and saved now.”

“I’m still not sure I follow you, Inspector Cotta.”

“Then I’ll spell it out for you, Jupiter Jones—I’ve been assigned to pick up Victor Hugenay from the California State Prison and take him on a little excursion. Hugenay himself is to save the *Red Buffalo* from destruction.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tomorrow... you three be at the prison at 2 pm on the dot.”

“We three?”

“That’s right. The famous Three Investigators... or did you think I called at this time of the night to have a chat with you? In the end, you three rascals are the only ones who know what it’s all about, so you’re coming with me—as my assistants. You assist me by giving me information when I ask for it... even though I may not consider what you have to say... Most importantly, you do what I tell you. Do we understand each other? Tomorrow at two.”

Before Jupiter could follow up, Cotta had hung up.

10. The Situation in Mercury

Seven people were in the prison meeting room. Sitting next to each other were Jupiter, Pete, Bob, Inspector Cotta and his colleague Officer Stanford. Opposite them was Captain Caine—a tough-looking woman in uniform, who was the head of this section of the prison. With her was Lieutenant Rosner.

The rainy afternoon light filtered into the room through the window overlooking the car park. Additional illumination was provided by cold white fluorescent light. A large whiteboard hung on the wall, and on a side table was a silver flask of coffee that no one was touching.

“All right,” Captain Caine raised her smoky voice. “Let’s get straight to the point... According to the information I’ve received from the DA’s office, this is some kind of emergency. So, Inspector Cotta, could I ask you to get us all on board and brief us on the current situation? ... And perhaps you could also tell us why you’ve brought your family with you.” Captain Caine gave The Three Investigators a disapproving look.

Cotta gasped for breath. “These three boys are not part of my family, Captain. If they were, I would have already disowned them. These three are investigators and they got this case rolling.”

Caine smirked. “Hmm... investigators,” she repeated mockingly.

“That’s right, ma’am,” Jupiter took the floor. “Incidentally, we’re the ones who were responsible for the arrest of Victor Hugenay... and also Javier Juárez... and—”

“That’s enough, Jupiter,” Cotta interrupted him. “The boys are Hugenay experts, so to speak. As much as I would have liked to leave them at home, they are here to give me information when I need it. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Whatever you say,” Caine replied with amusement. “You’re in charge of this operation.”

“To start off,” Cotta began, “one of Hugenay’s adversaries, the aforementioned Javier Juárez, who is now deceased, stole a valuable painting and hid it in a secret location. The boys have clues about the hiding place, but they have not been able to find out any other details. As a result, Jupiter paid Mr Hugenay a visit yesterday.”

“—Through express authorization,” Lieutenant Rosner informed her superior.

“Mr Hugenay was able to do something with the clues,” Jupiter continued. “Most importantly, he told me that the painting is in danger of being destroyed. However, I couldn’t get more details from him.”

“Instead, he called his lawyer, who immediately contacted the DA’s office to negotiate a deal,” said Cotta. “Hugenay is prepared to reveal the hiding place of the painting... in return for a reduction in his prison sentence.”

“Is that possible?” Pete asked in surprise.

“This is not unusual,” Captain Caine said. “Prisoners, or their legal representatives, do negotiate for a reduced sentence or an improvement in prison conditions in return for revealing secrets. This usually involves complicity or evidence, but information leading to the recovery of stolen items can also be considered in this way.”

Addressing Cotta, the captain continued: “—And if the DA’s office agrees, that’s fine by me.”

“However, this matter is a little different,” Cotta added. “Hugenay insists on being involved in recovering the painting.”

“For what reason?”

“He claims that only he is in a position to recover the item.”

“You want him to get it?” Captain Caine grunted unwillingly. “I thought that was your responsibility.”

“It is... with Hugenay’s assistance.”

“He was talking about a house with traps in it,” Jupiter explained. “—A place that can be dangerous ‘if you don’t know your way around it’.”

“We’ll find out if that’s true,” said Cotta, “and that has to be done today.”

“Today?” Lieutenant Rosner exclaimed in surprise.

“That was what I was instructed to do,” Cotta confirmed. “I don’t know the reason for the rush, so I’m just as surprised as you are. The only person who understands everything that’s going on at the moment is the man behind bars—of all people.”

Caine sighed. “All right. Then we had better ask Mr Hugenay ourselves. Lieutenant Rosner?”

The lieutenant nodded and left the room. Shortly afterwards, she and another guard named Sergeant Tyler led the prisoner in. Victor Hugenay’s hands were handcuffed in front of his body. He nodded in a friendly manner and took a seat on a chair at the table a little way away from everyone else. Lieutenant Rosner and her colleague Tyler positioned themselves behind him.

“So, Mr Hugenay,” said Captain Caine, “you know why you’re here?”

Hugenay nodded. “I think I know. Nice to see you again, Inspector Cotta, and you two as well, Pete and Bob.”

“Save that and get to the point,” Cotta said curtly. “With any luck, if we can bring this matter to a conclusion today, I can then get on with my holiday.”

“All right, then,” Hugenay said. “It looks like Javier Juárez stole the *Red Buffalo*—you already know that. Before I was arrested, I was working with Señor Juárez. I tried to find out as much as I could about him and one day I tracked him to one of his secret hideouts. It was a small house in the south-east of the Sierra Nevada.”

“Not far from California City,” Jupiter whispered to his colleagues.

“I almost lost my life there,” Hugenay continued.

“How so?” asked Cotta impatiently.

“The house was very well protected against unauthorized entry. If I hadn’t been watching Señor Juárez from a short distance as he entered the building and disarmed his security systems, one of his booby traps might have killed me.”

“You mean like poison darts and snake pits?” Bob asked.

Hugenay nodded seriously. “Something like that.”

“—And you think the painting is hidden there?” Cotta followed up.

“Our friend Jupiter put me onto it—the House of Roaring Waters.”

“Juárez’s message to his daughter mentioned a dangerous place,” Jupiter explained. “It all fits together.”

Cotta turned to Hugenay and said: “Is that why you want us to take you along? Because you know the traps and can disarm them but we can’t? You don’t seem to trust the police too much.”

"It's not that, Inspector Cotta," Hugenay said calmly. "With the necessary care and caution, you could certainly disarm the traps, but you would need time, and we don't have that."

"Why is that?"

"—Because the house is about to be washed away. It's in a small village called Mercury. You may have heard about it on the news in the last few days."

Bob suddenly remembered: "The dam! Mercury is the place that's under threat because the nearby dam could burst due to all the rain."

"Actually... there are safety mechanisms to prevent damage to the dam," Hugenay explained, "but there's a problem. Please let me explain..."

"Like many reservoirs, Rosalia Lake has an outlet around the bottom of the dam wall. This bottom outlet is controlled by a gate to release a constant stream of water from the reservoir into Rosalia River. If the reservoir water level rises beyond capacity, such as during periods of excessive water accumulation like heavy rainfall, this can cause dam over-topping and catastrophic failure. In such circumstances, the bottom outlet cannot be solely relied upon to maintain a safe water level within the reservoir.

"To address this, Rosalia Lake has a feature known as an emergency spillway. This is an outlet located near the top of the dam, and the opening is controlled by a gate to regulate the flow of water out into a steep channel that will then safely divert the water downstream into Rosalia River. The channel is like a huge water slide. It is a concrete structure with features for dissipating the energy of rapidly flowing water to safeguard the environment.

"However... as the channel has never had to be used in recent decades, maintenance has been severely neglected. Several parts of it, including the concrete bed, have deteriorated. When the spillway gate was opened a few days ago to lower the water level, the force from the water further damaged the channel to such an extent that the water broke out from the channel and went straight to several parts of the village. The gate was quickly closed to prevent a disaster.

"As it is, there is no end to the rain in sight. The reservoir is filling up again. To prevent over-topping, the gate will have to be reopened, despite the channel being damaged. Mercury will be flooded in any case, but opening the gate is the lesser evil because at least the dam will be saved. The eight hundred residents of Mercury have been evacuated since this morning."

"So you're not only an art connoisseur, but also very well-informed about dam operations," Captain Caine noted.

"Since I've been living within six square metres, listening to the radio has been my favourite pastime. I'm aware of the current situation at Rosalia Lake."

Inspector Cotta narrowed his eyes. "—And Juárez's hiding place is one of the houses threatened by the flooding?"

"That's right. It's not called the House of Roaring Waters for nothing. It's not far from the bottom outlet through which the water rushes day in, day out."

"Stanford," the inspector said to his colleague who had been taking notes in silence. "Try to contact the authorities in Mercury. Find out how much time we have left."

Officer Stanford nodded and left the room with his phone drawn out.

"There's hardly any time left," Hugenay claimed, "but if we leave immediately, we at least have a chance of saving the painting."

"Why don't you just tell us which house it is?" Cotta suggested in a casual tone.

"If I do that, you still won't be able to deal with the traps on your own," said Hugenay. "I know what you're thinking, Inspector Cotta, but I assure you that I have no intention of

escaping.” As if to prove it, Hugenay held up his handcuffs. “How could I?”

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Cotta decided.

Captain Caine took the hint and instructed Lieutenant Rosner and Sergeant Tyler to escort Victor Hugenay out.

“I’ve never encountered a situation like this in my career,” Caine admitted when the master thief had left the room. “To be honest, I think Hugenay is no push-over... but if that’s what the DA orders, I’m not going to object. We’ll take care of getting the prisoner there... but you, Inspector, are responsible for retrieving the painting. I want nothing to do with it.”

Jupiter had bitten his tongue several times during the conversation. Now it burst out of him: “You mustn’t release him, Captain.”

The prison warden looked at him in surprise. “I have no intention of releasing him, young man. After this little excursion, he’ll end up back in his cell.”

“He’ll try to escape, even if he says otherwise,” Jupe insisted.

Caine laughed. “Your concern is touching, but it’s not the first time my people have done a prisoner transport like this.”

“Captain, this is not your typical prisoner transport,” Jupe cried. “You are presenting Hugenay the opportunity to escape!”

“He’ll be handcuffed and under guard.”

“That won’t stop him.”

“Really?” Caine was slowly losing her patience. “What do you think he’s going to do? Free himself from the shackles like Houdini and then vanish into thin air?”

“I don’t know his plan,” Jupiter admitted, “but he definitely has one. He’s no ordinary prisoner—he’s Victor Hugenay.”

“His plan is to get his prison sentence reduced,” the captain said.

“But—”

“Enough already. I have well-trained people who have dealt with far more dangerous people than this Frenchman.”

“Your choice of words alone shows that you underestimate him.”

“Jupiter doesn’t mean that,” Cotta intervened.

“I do mean it!”

“Jupiter!” The inspector glared at him. “That’s enough!”

The First Investigator swallowed his next remark and resisted the impulse to cross his arms.

Just then, Officer Stanford returned. “It’s chaos in Mercury,” he reported. “The police are all busy evacuating and sealing off the area. I could hardly get anyone to talk to me. When I did get someone on the line, I was told off that they have other things to worry about than saving a painting.”

“Understandable,” Cotta conceded. “After all, they have their duties just as we have ours. How much time do you think we have left, Officer?”

“From what I know, only a few hours.”

“Then we better get going.” Inspector Cotta and The Three Investigators rose from their chairs. “How soon can we leave, Captain?”

“Give me thirty minutes.”

“All right.” Cotta shook hands with Caine, then he, Officer Stanford and The Three Investigators left the prison building.

“Inspector Cotta,” Jupiter began as they made their way outside to their cars.

Cotta raised his hand defensively. “I’ve heard your concerns, Jupiter... but I have work to do now. Do we understand each other? Good. Go home. I’ll tell you tomorrow how the

story ended... no, next week, when I'm back from my holiday."

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into," said Jupiter.

"Does anyone on this earth still believe that police officers are put on the job after going through intensive training, not by watching TV programmes or reading detective story books? Listen to me, Jupiter Jones—your remark to the captain was not helpful and actually quite disrespectful. In fact, your lack of respect for people around you is frankly insulting. I'm a seasoned police officer and I know what I'm doing. On the other hand, you are a cheeky schoolboy who is now packing up his two speechless friends and going home to Rocky Beach... and don't you dare—" He thrust his index finger into the air like a sword. "Don't you dare show your faces anywhere near Mercury. Do we understand each other?"

Jupiter didn't respond, but just stared at Cotta darkly.

"Come on, Stanford, we've got work to do... and if I may give you one piece of advice for your future career—get yourself transferred somewhere else. As long as these three guys live in Rocky Beach, you'll never be safe from them."

The two police officers got into their car and drove off through the rain.

"Goodness me!" Pete remarked. "I've rarely seen him so angry."

"He's given you quite a tongue-lashing, Jupe," said Bob.

The First Investigator remained calm. "That doesn't impress me," he claimed. "Come on, we'd better hurry up."

"Hurry up?"

"Yes. We have to get to Mercury ahead of Cotta."

11. Warning: High Voltage!

“You want to go to Mercury now?” Pete asked angrily as he ran after Jupiter.

“Otherwise when? It’ll be too late in a few hours.”

“To the booby trap house? What about the poison darts and snake pits?”

“I’m not worried about the traps. Juárez trusted his daughter to deal with them, so we’ll manage.”

“Sure, if the booby traps don’t get you, Cotta will,” Bob argued. “He will rip your head off!”

“Ours,” corrected Pete. “Cotta will rip our heads off. What are you up to anyway, Jupe?”

“I want to save the *Red Buffalo*... and stop Hugenay from escaping.”

“—But Jupe,” Pete countered, “don’t you think Cotta and the people from the prison have the situation under control?”

“No, on the contrary. They’re underestimating the situation... and Hugenay.”

“—Or you’re overestimating him,” Pete interjected. “Have you ever thought about that?”

“The thought did cross my mind,” Jupiter admitted, “but even if there’s the slightest chance that Hugenay will seize to escape, I want to be there... and it’s not just a whiff. I’m firmly convinced of that.” Jupiter looked at his friends seriously. “I’m off to Mercury now—with or without you.”

Pete and Bob looked at each other. They both rolled their eyes.

Finally Bob sighed, resigned to his fate. “Mercury it is, then.”

The journey from the prison to Mercury took just under an hour and a half. Bob had left the driving to Pete so that he could use his mobile phone to find out about the village and the dam.

When they were approaching the narrowing valley of Rosalia River, it started to rain again. The sun would soon set and the low-hanging clouds further darkened the sky.

As the Second Investigator steered the car around a bend, the village came into view. Bob found out that Mercury had about two hundred houses scattered loosely around the valley. The little village looked perfectly normal apart from the gigantic dam wall that stuck into the landscape in front of them like an axe cutting off the valley. As the road was below the top of the wall, the boys were denied a view of the reservoir.

“Impressive,” said Pete. “Even from a distance, the thing looks huge.”

“The wall is 102 metres high and 412 metres wide,” Bob reported.

At the bottom centre of the dam wall was the outlet as described by Hugenay. The boys could see that water now rushed out with great force and fed the river. At one side of the top of the dam, where the spillway was located, an open concrete channel led down, nestled against the steep mountainside. The channel curved around the side of Mercury village, leading into Rosalia River as well.

“It really does look like a huge water slide,” Pete remarked, “just like Hugenay described it.”

“You can see the broken parts of the channel,” Bob pointed out. “If they open the spillway gate, the water will rush down and smash out of the channel instead of diverting into

the river.”

“Not if, Bob,” Jupiter corrected. “They will have to open it to prevent water from overtopping the dam.”

“The excess water will flow unhindered into Mercury... and flood the valley.” Bob swallowed. “The place won’t make it through unscathed.”

“Some houses will definitely be flooded... hopefully not all.”

Red tail lights came into view ahead of them. There were about a dozen white vans parked on the side of the road. Television cameras were set up and thick strands of cables snaked along the ground. People were running around everywhere.

“The press,” Bob murmured when he recognized the wordings and logos on the vans. “They’re broadcast vans from various TV stations.”

“—Live from the drama at Rosalia Lake,” said Pete, “and the road is closed up ahead. Can you see the barrier?”

At the barrier, a woman in a high-visibility waistcoat waved a stop sign and signalled to them to turn around. Pete braked and Bob got out. He approached the woman in the high-visibility waistcoat.

“What’s the situation?” Bob asked.

“Dramatic,” the woman explained. “You can’t go any further here! The whole of Mercury is closed! The reservoir could overflow at any moment.”

“At any moment? Really?”

“Well, almost, but the place has already been evacuated. No one has been there for two hours. You’d better get back to the freeway. Listen to the radio. You’ll be informed about everything.”

Bob thanked her and returned to the car. “There’s no way through here, fellas.”

“Not this way, no,” Jupe agreed.

“I’m sure the other roads are closed too.”

“I wasn’t talking about a road...”

Five minutes later, Pete had driven back to a junction where a dirt road led to a secluded farm. They left the car and walked back along the slope above the road block.

By the time they reached the dam, dusk had fallen. All eyes were on the dam wall. Nobody was looking in other directions, not even the security guards at the barrier. Unnoticed, The Three Investigators crept past the road block in an arc and went back down to the road some distance away.

“That was easier than I thought,” Pete marvelled.

They followed the road down into the valley. As Mercury had already been evacuated, the streets in the village were deserted. There were no lights in any of the houses. In fact, it was like a ghost town.

“Contrary to Hugenay’s claim, the House of Roaring Waters should be quite easy to find,” Jupiter said. “He said himself that it’s very close to the bottom outlet. There aren’t too many buildings there.”

The last road before the dam wall ended in a dead end. From here, a well-trodden path led to a building located about fifty metres from the dam wall. It was made entirely of grey stone blocks and was not a residential building, but appeared to be part of the dam complex. The stone wall was covered in moss and the roof had a visible dent. Not far away, the water shot out of the bottom outlet like a horizontal fountain.

“That’s the old gate house,” Bob explained. “There is a tunnel going from under the building to the dam wall. However, this facility is currently abandoned. It was last used when there was an old, much smaller dam. This smaller dam was replaced by the present monstrosity sixty years ago. The current gate house is over there...” He pointed to the left, where a larger and more modern building had been built on the slope a good distance away.

“Well researched,” praised Jupiter.

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “That’s what I do.”

As they approached the old gate house, they tilted their heads back and looked up at the huge dam wall. The grey wall took up their entire field of vision to the left and right and upwards, and was almost lost in the twilight above them. It seemed to grow with every step they took.

“A huge thing,” Pete murmured in awe. “Imagine millions of cubic metres of water dammed up behind it and pressing against the concrete...”

“The wall will hold,” Jupe said, “but that’s not the problem. It’s only when the water overflows that it becomes dangerous.”

“That actually happened decades ago,” Bob reported, pointing to a narrow concrete staircase that zigzagged up the wall in front of them. Even from that distance away, they could see that many parts of the staircase and its metal railings had broken away. “The flooding back then was responsible for that.”

“Where did this staircase lead to?” Pete asked.

“—To an inspection gallery inside the wall. The gallery is a tunnel with facilities for taking measurements, and for the monitoring and maintenance of the structure. Today, there are two entrances to the gallery, one at each dam abutment. These are the huge concrete structures at the two ends of the dam wall where it meets the valley.”

Soon they were standing in front of the old gate house. It had a steel door with several signs on it—‘No Trespassing’. ‘Private Property’, ‘Warning: High Voltage!’ There were several barred and narrow embrasure windows—ones with openings that were narrow on the outside, but wide on the inside.

“Nowhere in Mercury does the water roar louder, that’s for sure,” said Pete.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten your favourite tools,” said Jupiter.

“Of course not.” The Second Investigator pulled out of his pocket, his lock pick set, which he always carried with him. “—But I don’t want to be surprised by Cotta. He should be turning up here any minute.”

“Bob, you keep an eye on Cotta and the rest,” Jupe instructed, “and also find a suitable place for us to hide in case they come. Pete and I will attempt to get into the building.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” Bob took a look through the binoculars he had brought with him. Although it was dark by now, the road block was clearly visible thanks to the numerous floodlights.

“There they are,” Bob reported. “I can see a police car and a van. Someone is talking to the woman at the barrier and showing her something. I think it’s Cotta... Now, he’s getting back into the car. Hurry up, fellas! They’ll be here in two minutes!”

“All right.” Pete rubbed his palms together. “Let’s get to work then.”

He bent down, took a closer look at the door lock and decided on a lock pick from his small case. He inserted the tool into the lock and began to turn it around.

“Aaaargh!” Pete suddenly jerked his hand away.

12. The House of Roaring Waters

“Pete, what happened?” asked Jupiter.

“Electric shock! Aaaargh!” Pete flicked his right hand several times in pain.

The First Investigator tapped the lock pick lightly. Nothing happened. He took it between his thumb and forefinger, turned it and—

“Aaaargh!” It was Jupe’s turn to get an electric shock.

“You could have just taken my word for it,” said Pete. “What are we going to do now?”

“Find a way to pull out the lock pick otherwise Cotta will see it,” Bob suggested.

Pete managed to get the lock pick back without getting zapped. “And now what?”

“Fellas!” Bob suddenly called out. “I hear a car coming. Quick over there!” Bob pointed to the corner of the house, and the three of them scurried to take cover behind a thick bush.

Two vehicles stopped some distance away. A small group approached, led by Inspector Cotta. Behind him were Lieutenant Rosner and her colleague Sergeant Tyler. They were guarding Victor Hugenay, who was still wearing grey prisoner’s clothing. His hands were in handcuffs and an electronic ankle bracelet was attached to his left ankle. Cotta’s colleague Stanford had apparently stayed in the car.

At the door, Cotta shook the doorknob. Nothing happened. “—And now what?” he asked Hugenay.

“We need the key.” Hugenay stepped under one of the narrow embrasure windows and reached over his head with his handcuffed hands. “I’d have to pull myself up to just below the roof to get to the hiding place of the key. It’s difficult with the handcuffs.”

“Then why don’t you let me do it instead?” Cotta offered in an overly friendly manner.

Hugenay willingly stepped aside. “Be my guest!”

Cotta held on to the window ledge with one hand, found a foothold in the joints of the stone wall with his feet and pulled himself up a little. “Where exactly is the hiding place?”

“Further to the left... now upwards... further up... further still. I don’t want to disrespect you, Inspector Cotta, but Señor Juárez was a good deal taller than you.”

Cotta stretched a little more and pressed out strainedly: “If you’re speculating that I’ll take off your handcuffs—”

Suddenly, a bright light flared up in the darkness on their left. The cone of a powerful flashlight approached and caught sight of the inspector.

“Hey, you there! What are you doing here? Have you gone mad?” A man approached, apparently coming from the new gate house.

Cotta dropped back to the ground.

“Who are you? You have no business here! This place has been evacuated. There’s going to be a disaster any minute now!” The stranger’s face almost disappeared under a thick beard. He was wearing a yellow safety helmet and had a safety waistcoat stretched over his beer belly.

Cotta sighed and took a few steps towards the man. “Inspector Cotta from the Rocky Beach Police Department,” he said, holding out his ID. “We have an authorization to be here.”

“—And I’ve had enough of this nonsense. I know about your authorization. My name is Riley, and I’m the dam manager. Some busybody rang me up and told me a hair-raising story about a hidden painting... A painting, for goodness’ sake! Do you know what’s going on here? Anyway, I don’t care two hoots about your authorization! Your life is in danger here, do you realize that?”

“Calm down, Mr Riley. We—”

“I’m not calming down at all, Inspector Gotcha or whatever your name is. You get out of here now! The reservoir could overflow at any moment! To prevent that, we’re forced to open the spillway gate. Seconds later, everything here will be flooded. This old gate house will be history, and so will all of you if you are still here.”

“How much time do we have left?”

“None at all! Have you not been listening to me?”

“Listen, my good man. I hear you, but I have a job to do. How long?”

At first it looked as if the dam manager didn’t want to get involved in a discussion, but then he surprisingly gave in. “Ten minutes. When you hear the siren, get to the new gate house immediately. It’s elevated on a slope. You should be safe there. I won’t come back and take you by the hand. Do you understand me?” He turned on his heel.

“Just a moment,” Cotta called after him. “Do you have a key for this door?”

“No!” the man barked back over his shoulder. “This building is private property.” He disappeared into the darkness.

“All right, then. None of us are tall enough to get the key. Lieutenant Rosner, take the handcuffs off the gentleman.”

Rosner did not disagree. She also realized how short the time was. Seconds later, Victor Hugenay stood before them without his handcuffs.

“I can’t believe it,” Jupiter hissed from his hiding place.

“Shall I proceed?” The master thief pointed questioningly at the roof.

“Just get on with it before I change my mind,” grumbled Cotta.

Hugenay pulled himself up the wall in the same way as Cotta had done, but he was able to reach higher. His fingers found a gap and felt around in it. A moment later, Hugenay dropped down and in his hand was a key. He went to the door, but Cotta held him back and took the key from him.

“Jupe,” Pete hissed. “Don’t we have to warn Cotta?”

“—And reveal that we’re here?” Jupiter murmured back. “He’ll survive.”

“Better let me do it,” Hugenay suggested.

Cotta smiled mockingly. “Will a guillotine chop off my hand if I try to open the door?” He shook his head, put the key in the lock and turned it.

“Aaaargh!” Instantly, Cotta yelled out and jumped back, clutching his hands in pain.

“Inspector Cotta!” Lieutenant Rosner startled, and was about to rush to his aid.

Cotta waved her off and stared at his hand in disbelief. “An electric shock! Unbelievable!”

“I had warned you.” Hugenay shrugged his shoulders innocently.

“How do I get this darn door open?”

“By letting me do it... or don’t you trust me?”

Angrily, Cotta stepped aside and made an inviting gesture with his hand.

“I want to see how he does it,” Pete whispered and raised his head a bit more to get a better view. Luckily, The Three Investigators were hiding close enough and there was enough light at the door.

Hugenay reached for the key, which was still in the lock, and turned it. He didn't get zapped. Instead, there was a click and the door opened.

"Ingenious!" Pete whispered to his friends. "He turned the key the opposite way! How do you even rig the lock that way?"

Hugenay was about to enter the building, but Cotta pushed in front of him. One by one, the four of them disappeared inside. The Three Investigators could no longer see or hear them.

"What now?" asked Bob.

"We need to know what's going on... The windows!"

There were two of these embrasure windows on the right-hand side of the building. They could see through them on tiptoe. Pete and Bob shared the one on the right, while Jupiter peered through the one on the left.

The inside of the gate house consisted of a tangle of thick pipes, valves and cranks. The lights of Inspector Cotta and Lieutenant Rosner danced through the room. Fortunately, neither of them was shining their lights at the windows.

"Where is the painting hidden?" Cotta asked impatiently.

"Below us," said Hugenay, pointing at his feet, where there was a rusty metal trapdoor in the floor. The master thief crouched down. "Do you mind?"

"What are you doing?" Cotta asked.

"My ankle is itching under this electronic gizmo."

"Don't do that," Cotta said. "Move away and we'll open it." He nodded to Lieutenant Rosner and Sergeant Tyler.

"Of course..." Hugenay took two steps back.

Rosner took his place, released the latch embedded in the trapdoor and tried to lift the metal cover. It was so heavy that Tyler had to help. The cover squeaked on its hinges as they joined forces to lift it up.

The cover was exactly vertical when Rosner and Tyler started to twitch at the same time.

Jupiter and Pete immediately realized what they were seeing. It was another electric shock! This time, however, it seemed to be much stronger. Rosner and Tyler twitched for seconds with their hands still in contact with the metal cover.

Cotta had the presence of mind to leap forward and kick the cover. Rosner's and Tyler's fingers slipped off and they both fell down as the cover crashed backwards onto the floor, revealing a yawning dark opening.

"Rosner! Tyler! Can you hear me?"

The two prison officers did not respond. They had lost consciousness due to the electric shock.

Cotta reached for his walkie-talkie. "Officer Stanford, I need assistance, get over here now!"

"Roger, Inspector."

"Hugenay!" Cotta rumbled. "You're responsible for this!"

"Please, Inspector. How could I have anything to do with this? I was in prison."

"You knew about this trap."

"Only the door lock. I had no idea that this trapdoor was also rigged. I watched Señor Juárez climb down here at the time. Since he designed the electric traps, he naturally knew how to get around them."

"Hold out your arms. I have to put the handcuffs back on you."

"That's really not necessary, Inspector. Do you think I'm going to run away from you?"

"Hold out your arms!" Cotta repeated.

Their argument was interrupted by a siren wailing through the valley. It was a long, menacing wail, amplified by the echo that reverberated off the dam wall.

"The siren!" gasped Bob. "They're opening the spillway gate!"

"In a few minutes, everything here will be under water," said Hugenay. "You'd better take care of the two prison officers instead of my handcuffs."

"Then help me get these two to safety."

"I'm sorry, Inspector, your other colleague can help you. I'm here for another reason."

"What do you mean?"

"Please don't misunderstand me, but we're running out of time." Hugenay reached down and grabbed the flashlight Lieutenant Rosner had dropped. "*Au revoir!*"

"What do you mean *au revoir*?"

The master thief didn't answer, but hurriedly disappeared through the trapdoor.

13. Jupiter Sets Off in Pursuit

Jupiter sucked in his breath in shock. “He’s getting away! I knew it! He’s getting away!”

“Jupe!” Pete hissed as the First Investigator was about to leave his observation post at the window. “Stay here! If Cotta sees us—”

“We can’t let him get away!” Jupiter almost shouted. He didn’t care whether Cotta heard him or not.

At that moment, Inspector Cotta dragged the unconscious Lieutenant Rosner through the doorway, swearing as he did so. His eyes fell on The Three Investigators and he paused. His face reflected surprise, anger and relief.

“You guys! I knew it.”

“In... Inspector Cotta,” Pete stammered. “We can explain!”

“Later! Tyler’s unconscious in there. We have to get him and Rosner out of here before the water comes!”

Cotta was right—now was not the time for explanations.

“Come on, fellas!” Pete hurried into the gate house where Sergeant Tyler was lying motionless on the floor. He grabbed him by both arms and dragged him outside. Bob took his legs. When they were through the door, Officer Stanford came running up and helped Cotta carry Lieutenant Rosner.

“We have to get up the slope,” Cotta gasped breathlessly. “Hurry up!”

Bob looked over to the channel. Masses of water were gushing down, smashing through the broken parts of the channel, straight down to the valley.

“The water’s coming!” shouted Pete. “Quick, Bob, before it gets here!”

They groaned and gasped as they pulled the two still unconscious prison officers up the slope. Luckily there were four of them.

Bob stumbled. No, there should be five of them! Cotta, Stanford and... where was Jupiter? Bob looked around in panic and stopped. “Pete! Jupe is not here! Where is he?”

“No way,” cursed Pete. “I knew it. We have to look for him!”

“Too late! The water is here!” Bob yelled.

At that moment, the water came like a tidal wave as wide as a four-lane highway. It wasn’t particularly fast and was only ankle-deep at first, but even that was enough to sweep away plants and debris. In just a few seconds, the carpet of clear water turned into a brown slurry that rose higher and higher. Moments later, the path to the old gate house was cut off. The force of the water was frightening.

Bob was sure that the First Investigator had gone down to the tunnel in pursuit of Hugenay. If the master thief could get back out, there was a chance that Jupiter could too. However, everyone who knew Jupiter Jones knew that he was not athletic. He had problems just climbing over a wall. He was also scared of heights. On the other hand, Hugenay was agile and quick. The First Investigator would have problems keeping pace with the master thief... Then, there was the water, and very soon, the tunnel would be filled with it... Bob pushed the thought aside.

“Come on, Bob! We’ve got to keep going up!” Pete yelled. He and Bob grabbed Sergeant Tyler’s hands and feet even tighter and dragged the prison guard up as fast as they could.

People in high-visibility waistcoats and with yellow safety helmets on their heads came running towards them. The beams of several flashlights flickered through the night. People shouted in confusion and the siren at the new gate house wailed deafeningly loud.

None of this bothered Bob. He peered intently down the slope and searched the chaos of the foaming tide for Jupiter. The First Investigator was nowhere to be seen.

Through the door of the gate house, Jupiter watched as Bob and Pete pulled the motionless Tyler up the slope. They hadn't yet realized that the First Investigator was no longer at their side. Just as well—Jupiter had no time to lose.

He went to the trapdoor and shone his light into the darkness. A brick-lined shaft led about two metres down. At the bottom was a tunnel that led towards the dam wall. Metal rungs were embedded in the shaft wall. Were they also rigged? Hugenay had used them, but Juve had to be careful. He crouched down and felt the top few rungs carefully. No electric shock.

So as not to be seen, the First Investigator switched off his flashlight and fastened it to his belt. Then he climbed down the shaft.

Once at the bottom, he looked around. A short distance away, the beam of Hugenay's flashlight danced through the tunnel, illuminating the brick walls and the pipes and rails that ran along them. These were remnants of a technical system that was no longer in operation.

As the First Investigator crept forward, he pressed himself tightly against the wall and hoped that Hugenay would not see him. Fortunately, he didn't have to worry about the sound of his footsteps as the siren drowned out everything down here.

The Frenchman moved rapidly along and at one point, he suddenly stopped. He reached up to the tunnel ceiling and fiddled around. Apparently something was concealed there. After a few moments, he had in his hands an elongated object that looked like a piece of stove pipe. Was that the *Red Buffalo*—rolled up and hidden in a tube container?

Suddenly there was a whooshing noise behind the First Investigator. He squeezed himself between two vertical pipes and barely escaped Hugenay's searching light. Water was now cascading down the tunnel. The water from the reservoir had obviously reached the old gate house. An icy wave washed over Jupiter's feet.

The tunnel was filling up at record speed. In a few minutes, it would have risen to the ceiling. He had to get out of here!

Hugenay apparently came to the same conclusion. His dancing light began to move, but he did not return the way he came in. Instead, he ran further forwards. Jupiter suspected that there was an exit ahead and continued following Hugenay. Sure enough, at the end of the tunnel, there was a shaft leading upwards!

Hugenay climbed up and paused. He was probably undoing a latch to open the trapdoor. Seconds later, he continued climbing up. No water shot down. Apparently the opening was at a higher level than the one they had come through.

The water was now up to Jupiter's knees. His steps became more laboured, but eventually he had also reached the shaft. He immediately grabbed the rungs, climbed up and was relieved to get out of the icy water.

The First Investigator pushed open a trapdoor and stepped out into the open. The underground tunnel had led him nearer to the dam wall. Less than five metres away from him, the huge structure towered high into the air. From here, he could also see water gushing out of the damaged channel into the valley and smashing against the old gate house.

Jupiter found himself on an island surrounded by raging flood waters and bordered on one side by the wall. This island quickly became smaller.

Where was Hugenay? He must still be nearby.

There! The master thief was scrambling up the concrete staircase at the dam wall not far from where Jupiter was.

Jupiter had to follow. The lowest steps were blocked by a grating. He climbed over it, but in the process, his right trouser leg caught the top of one of the bars and tore. Jupiter paid no attention to this.

The concrete staircase was mostly deteriorated. Many steps had crumbled, and the railings were rusty and were either bent in several places or missing completely. The staircase zigzagged upwards, with six steps to the next landing. The higher he climbed, the more deteriorated the stairs became.

Jupiter couldn't make the mistake of looking down. As soon as he even thought about what he was doing here, he would feel dizzy, so he kept his eyes looking up ahead and climbed after Hugenay as fast as he could. After just a few steps, he got a stitch in his side, and his wet trouser legs and shoes slowed him down even more.

Then he reached a part of the staircase where four steps were gone, leaving a huge gap. Only the rusty railing connected the remaining parts of the staircase.

Jupiter involuntarily looked down. Below him was the section of the staircase he had just climbed. From this height, it looked frighteningly narrow. Next to it, the view into the depths opened up. Mercury was just a collection of toy houses. The First Investigator clung to the railing and forced himself to look ahead.

Hugenay was tall so he could have just leaped over the gap. Jupiter stepped back and considered taking a running start but there wasn't enough room. Perhaps it would be better to step on the lower bar of the railing and slowly make small steps across the gap. The railing still looked quite intact, but he'd better test it before he imposed his full weight onto the rusty bar.

The First Investigator gripped the railing firmly with both hands, placed one foot on the lower bar and slowly shifted his weight. It went well as Jupiter made his way across step-by-step until... the lower bar suddenly broke like a pretzel.

Jupiter tried to stretch his right leg back for a foothold, but he had ventured out too far. His hands gripped the railing tighter. However, under Jupiter's weight, the railing bent outwards and downwards.

It was like a scene made for an adventure movie. However, dangling dangerously from a broken railing, high up on the side of a dam wall, was not Indiana Jones, but Jupiter Jones. The First Investigator cried out in panic and tried to pull himself up the railing. At the same time, he desperately swung his feet but still couldn't find a foothold. The stairs ahead were too far away but fortunately, the railing didn't break off completely.

Just then, the siren was turned off. Thank goodness for that as the loud continuous alarm had been adding to the agony of the situation... but now, Jupiter's own panting rang loudly in his ears.

The First Investigator didn't have the strength to reach further up the railing. There was nothing he could do but hold on until someone came to rescue him... and it had to be soon, else he would fall into the depths and perish.

14. Left or Right?

The glare of a spotlight caught Jupiter. Startled, he almost let go of the railing. The light was coming from the new gate house. Someone had spotted him! Fine, he thought, but there wouldn't be enough time for someone to reach him as his strength was fading, and apparently his senses too. Now he thought he could hear footsteps. Could he be hallucinating?

Wait, no, there really were footsteps! Someone was coming down the stairs. Jupiter tilted his head back and blinked upwards.

What he saw was a rescuing hand appearing in the cold white light as if it had come straight from heaven. The hand grabbed Jupiter's wrist and pulled him upwards, seemingly without much effort. Jupiter swung his legs frantically until his feet found a foothold on the deteriorated staircase. With all his strength, he clambered to safety close to the dam wall and nestled against it.

Jupiter's heart was pounding in his ears and his hands were almost numb with pain and exertion. His panting breath could barely keep up. Black and coloured dots narrowed his field of vision and he had to fight not to faint.

"You stupid boy," his rescuer whispered close to him. Jupiter saw only light and shadow, but he recognized the voice. It was none other than Victor Hugenay!

"You need to take better care of yourself, you hear?" the master thief continued. "You should be safe here. I have to go now. *Au revoir!*" With that, the shadow turned away and went back up the stairs.

"Stop!" Jupiter tried to shout, but all that came out was an exhausted gasp. Only now did he realize how close he had come to falling to his death... but he had to get a hold of himself—he couldn't let Hugenay escape!

The First Investigator gathered his strength and pulled himself up. Step by step, he dragged himself up the staircase. After several steps, the staircase ended at a steel door. The First Investigator turned the knob. The door opened.

Behind it was a tunnel that led into the dam wall, possibly to the inspection gallery that Bob had told him about. As the door closed behind him, Jupiter unfastened his flashlight from his belt and switched it on. The tunnel was very narrow and just high enough to be able to move upright.

After stumbling ahead for a few metres, he reached a T-junction to a larger tunnel. This had to be the inspection gallery and it was lined with pipes and cables. Because of these obstructions, the light from his flashlight didn't reach very far in either direction. Hugenay had a minute or two head start. He was nowhere to be seen.

To the left or to the right? Jupiter shone his light on the ground. It was covered in seepage water—not an alarming amount, but it prevented any traces from being seen.

Bob had said that there were two entrances to this inspection gallery—one at each of the two abutments. Juve knew that the new gate house was on the left.

Wait! What's that on the left? His light shone on something grey in colour on the ground about three metres away. Jupiter went over and picked it up. It was a wet piece of cloth. Was that part of Hugenay's prisoner's clothing?

Jupiter didn't need to take a closer look because he knew what it meant. Hugenay went a few metres to the left and dropped the grey cloth from his clothing to create a false trail. Then he turned back and went the other way—to the right! That made sense as he wouldn't want to exit at the new gate house where the police, TV crews, and prison officers were waiting. Jupiter didn't know what lay at the right exit of the inspection gallery, but he surmised—freedom.

“I can see through you, Hugenay,” the First Investigator muttered. He quickly stuffed the cloth into his trouser pocket, and set off to the right.

The gallery was a narrow, cold and dark tunnel that followed the curvature of the dam. With only a glimmer of light coming from his flashlight, Jupiter stumbled along.

The distance seemed endless, especially when he had to dodge more obstacles along the way. Besides the pipes, there were trench drains at the base to divert off seep water. Protruding out of the wall at regular intervals were gauges, instruments, and metal cabinets with thick cables connecting them. Despite wanting to hurry along, Jupiter had to be careful not to bang into one of these obstacles and hurt himself.

Completely exhausted, he finally reached the right end of the gallery—but there was no door! Instead, there was a ladder leading up through a shaft. There had to be an exit higher up.

He gathered his strength once more and climbed the rungs. The climb demanded everything from Jupiter. His legs were shaking when he finally reached the top of the ladder. Here he discovered another inspection gallery on one side, leading away from the abutment... and on the other side, was a metal door!

Jupiter rushed over and pushed down the handle—but the door wouldn't open. He shook and pounded on the door, but it was no use. The door had to be blocked somehow from outside.

“There's no way,” the First Investigator cursed quietly. He pushed down the handle again and again, even though he knew how futile it was. He did it out of anger.

Hugenay had escaped. He had fooled them all. Jupiter had known it all along and yet the master thief had outsmarted him. He had probably also managed to get rid of his ankle bracelet. How could all this have happened?

The frustration overwhelmed Jupiter with a force that surprised him. He screamed with rage. When he realized how liberating it was, he screamed even louder.

It was already well past midnight. The commotion in the control centre of the new gate house had toned down significantly. Pete and Bob learned that the water flowing down the channel was a lot more stable.

The two of them then decided to sneak out of the new gate house and make their way to the staircase at the left abutment. They wanted to go into the inspection gallery to look for Jupe.

While climbing higher and higher up the stairs, the two investigators looked down onto parts of Mercury which were illuminated by the floodlights from the new gate house. The water gushing out of the broken channel gathered debris and mud along the way before washing over the houses. Two houses had been unable to withstand the force of the flood and had collapsed. Their roofs had floated away like paper boats. The old gate house was still standing and should remain so as it was made of stone and solidly built. It was frightening, but because of the open spillway gate, the water level of the reservoir should be slowly dropping.

“Go on, Pete, we can look at the damage later,” urged Bob. “We have to quickly get to the gallery!”

Suddenly at the staircase landing above them, the gallery door swung open with a crash.

“No need to,” said the Second Investigator. “There he is!”

Jupiter stumbled out and immediately crouched down on all fours, totally exhausted. Bob and Pete ran up the last flight of stairs to their friend.

“Jupe! Thank goodness!” Bob called out. “Have you gone mad? You nearly fell, if it hadn’t been for Hugenay.”

“You saw what happened?” gasped the First Investigator, out of breath.

“Of course,” Bob said. “I was the one who shone the spotlight on you.”

“We didn’t know where you were!” Pete blurted out “That was so reckless of you. You with your Hugenay obsession. That could have gone really wrong!”

“It’s all right, Pete,” said Bob soothingly. Jupiter was completely exhausted. It wasn’t the right time for reproaches. Bob looked compassionately into his friend’s eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I... I went to the other end,” Jupiter gasped. “The door there... I can’t open it... I had to come back this way... We... we have to—”

“Catch your breath first. What’s that sticking out of your pocket?” Bob pointed to the wet grey cloth.

“I found it... in the inspection gallery,” Jupe explained curtly. He could breathe later as there was no time to lose. “This might belong to Hugenay. Got to get it to Cotta... Get sniffer dogs... I knew Hugenay would escape... I knew it, and yet... I couldn’t prevent it... Is the ankle bracelet working? Is Cotta doing anything? Where is he?”

Pete and Bob exchanged worried glances.

Jupiter was taken aback. “What’s going on? What’s wrong with you two?”

“Maybe you should first come with us to the new gate house,” said Bob.

Confused, Jupiter let himself be helped to his feet and followed his friends down the stairs.

The First Investigator was led into the control centre. The large room was still bustling with activities. The people who worked here were pacing back and forth with phones to their ears or staring transfixed at computer monitors, display boards, and gauges.

Rosner and Tyler had recovered from their stupor. Exhausted, they sat at a small table drinking coffee. Officer Stanford was looking after them. Inspector Cotta was nowhere to be seen.

Mr Riley, the dam manager, immediately appeared in front of the First Investigator.

“Boy, boy, I really don’t know what’s got into you. I’d love to spank you myself, but I should probably be glad that nothing happened to you—thanks to that other mad man who hauled you up.”

Jupiter blinked. “Excuse me? Mad man?”

“Yeah... your lifesaver...” Riley replied, “so thank him nicely, kid.”

The dam manager then stepped aside, revealing none other than... Victor Hugenay! The master thief was sitting on a chair at another table, holding a mug of coffee in his hand and looking as if he had just been caught out in the rain on a walk. He smiled with pleasure.

“Jupiter... I’m glad to see you,” Hugenay said. “That was quite a close call. Are you all right? As soon as I saw that you were safe, I had to leave to complete my task quickly before

anything unforeseen happened. It was very reckless of you to follow me. What were you thinking?"

Jupiter was speechless, and that didn't happen often. His knees went weak.

"Sit down, Jupe, you're going pale," Bob said and pulled up a chair.

Jupiter plopped down on the seat and stared at the master thief as if he was a ghost. "The painting..." he finally managed to utter.

"It's in the next room," Pete replied. "Inspector Cotta is examining it right now."

At that moment, Cotta stepped out of an adjoining room and took off the gloves he had used to free the painting from the tube container. "Good news. The painting doesn't seem to have suffered any damage." Then he noticed the First Investigator. "Jupiter Jones. Have you gone out of your senses? I'd love to spank you myself."

"That's what Mr Riley wanted to do as well," Pete quipped. "Perhaps you two can toss a coin to see who goes first."

"—And you two!" Cotta thundered. "When I demanded you not to show your faces here, I thought I made myself clear. What were you thinking?"

"At least we saved Sergeant Tyler," Bob remarked meekly.

"—And that's the only thing that saves you two. You, on the other hand, my dear Jupiter, are in big trouble. I've got my hands full at the moment... but don't worry, my lecture will come... Jupiter? Are you even listening to me?"

Jupiter was still staring at Hugenay. The master thief hadn't escaped. He was sitting right in front of him. Now the First Investigator had to figure out what that meant...

15. Unanswered Questions

The video recording trembled slightly as the camera tried to focus on the boy dangling helplessly from the railing. It was a dramatic scene until a man suddenly stepped into the cone of light. He stretched out his hand and pulled the boy up with a single great effort. The man then disappeared from the scene, leaving the boy crouched against the wall, completely exhausted.

Two days had passed since the incident in Mercury. Jupiter sat on the sofa at Headquarters and watched the video clip for the umpteenth time. Even now, it still sent a shiver down his spine. His face was not identifiable on the video, but his rescuer's was. That's why the title of the video was: 'Dam Drama: Master Thief Becomes a Lifesaver'.

Several local news programmes have since aired it. There were just as many theories about the identity of the rescued boy as there were about how this dramatic situation could have come about in the first place. All the speculations were wrong, but Jupiter had no intention of telling the world the truth. He was glad that Aunt Mathilda had not yet learned of the existence of this video and his role in it. With a bit of luck, it would stay that way. It was already enough to get into trouble with Inspector Cotta.

"How many times are you going to watch that?" asked Bob, who was sitting at the desk in the trailer, writing the case report on *The Mystery of the Red Buffalo* for their archives.

Jupiter switched off the video and then covered his face with his hands in agony.

"I need your help, Jupe. I've never written such an unsatisfactory report. We've saved the painting, Victor Hugenay is back in prison, but there are still so many unanswered questions. Who is the mysterious Batman? What did he take from the house in California City? Is the case really closed if we just assume that it was Batman who broke into Alba's motel room, and who stole the cassette tape from you? ... Jupe? Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, yes," claimed the First Investigator. "Of course I am listening. Those are legitimate questions."

"Something else is bothering you, isn't it?"

Jupiter nodded. "I don't understand how I could be so wrong. I was absolutely convinced that Hugenay would try to escape."

He reached for the piece of grey fabric that he had mistakenly thought was part of Hugenay's prisoner's clothing. It had dried in the meantime and was hanging over the armrest of the sofa. Now, it had become a kind of symbol of his misjudgements.

"In a way, Hugenay fooled me by not fooling me," he mumbled.

"—But that turned out well. He's back in prison. There's no need to be upset."

"I'm upset because you're right, Bob. The case may be over... but it's not solved. There are too many unanswered questions, and the fact that there was no escape attempt doesn't fit the picture either."

"Maybe he wanted to escape but couldn't," Bob surmised. "Maybe he had a plan to get rid of his ankle bracelet, but it didn't work... so he had no choice but to turn back."

"He's not that unprepared," Jupe insisted. "He always has a plan."

"That may be true, but firstly, he planned in prison; and secondly, he only had one day so his plan couldn't have been too sophisticated."

“He could have thought about what he would do in a case like this beforehand,” Jupiter said. “He could always have been prepared... he could have—”

“—He could have really told the truth,” Bob interrupted his friend. “The fact that he wasn’t planning to escape is really the most obvious thing. Why do you refuse to believe that?”

“He had a plan... and I’m going to figure out what it was.”

Bob sighed. Jupiter had got his teeth into another Hugenay case after all. Trying to dissuade him was hopeless so Bob decided to change the subject. “Have you spoken to Alba in the meantime?”

“This morning. She’s just as happy as I am that the press hasn’t linked her to this story. She thanks us for solving the mystery of her father’s message. She is also delighted that the painting is back with its rightful owner and that she has nothing more to do with it.”

Just then, the Cold Gate was pushed open and moments later, a huge, colourful bouquet of flowers was brought into the trailer. The overflowing arrangement was so large that Pete, who was carrying it, was well-hidden behind it. “Sorry, fellas, but a flower delivery man handed me this. Do we have a vase?”

“Just outside... at the salvage yard,” Jupiter reminded him, “about five hundred of them. Take your pick.” He fished the greeting card out of the flowers. It said:

Dear Three Investigators,

Thanks to you, the real Red Buffalo is back where it belongs. It really means a lot to me. I look forward to catching up with you very soon. Meanwhile, here’s a small token of appreciation from me.

Sylvester Byron

“Nice,” said Pete, unimpressed, “but what are we supposed to do with flowers? They just take up space here. Not only that, they wither, drop off, and we have to clean up the mess. Mr Byron could have shown his appreciation better by paying for my car repairs.” He placed the bouquet on an empty armchair. “Anyway, I’m going to pick up my MG today. I can hardly wait. I’m just dreading the bill.”

“I’m sure Mr Byron will compensate you if you tell him the story,” Bob suggested.

“Compensate?” Pete scoffed. “Come to think of it, considering what we went through to recover his twenty-million-dollar painting, he should at least buy me a brand new car... What am I saying? He should buy each one of us a new car!”

“I love my beautiful Beetle,” Bob said.

“Yeah, right,” Pete remarked. “By the way, the answering machine is blinking. Did you see that?”

Jupiter nodded grumpily. “I was here when the call came in. Nothing important.”

“Nothing important?” Pete frowned.

Ignoring calls wasn’t usually Jupiter’s style. The Second Investigator pressed the play button. Inspector Cotta’s voice came out of the loudspeaker:

“Jupiter Jones. Don’t you think this is getting a bit silly? How much longer are you going to hide from me? My lecture is waiting for you, and if you want to stop me giving it to your aunt and uncle instead, you’d better call me back.”

Pete looked at the First Investigator questioningly. "So, how long are you going to hide from him?"

"—Until he forgets what he wants to tell me."

Just then, the phone rang.

"Bob, will you answer it?" Jupiter asked. "Tell Cotta I'm not here and won't be back for a year."

"I'll make it two years, okay?" Bob reached for the phone. "The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking."

"Hello? This is Jordan Parker. My sister called me. She told me about a 'ghost hookup' or something like that."

"Hookup," Bob corrected. "We call it the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup."

"Well, okay," Jordan said. "You wanted to know something about a dark blue motorbike?"

"Yup! Finally!" Bob replied excitedly. "What have you got?"

"Well, I think I know the motorbike you're looking for—the one with the Batman sticker. It belongs to a guy who lives in my neighbourhood."

"Really?" Bob reached for a pen. "Where exactly is this?" He wrote down the address that Jordan Parker gave him. "We weren't expecting anyone else to respond to our hookup. Thank you, Jordan! That's a great help." He hung up. "Fellas, we've got a lead on the 'Batcycle'. Maybe I can complete the report after all."

Jupiter's mood also lifted. "Let's see if this case springs a few more surprises."

The three scrambled out of the trailer. The First Investigator took the flowers with him to put it somewhere outside. Unfortunately, as soon as they came out of the Cold Gate, they bumped straight into Aunt Mathilda.

"Jupiter Jones, I'm going to tell you for the last time—it's about the bikes. They're due to be collected this coming Saturday and you still are nowhere near getting them ready. How many times do I have to remind you?"

"Perhaps one more time," Jupiter replied sheepishly. "Here, this is for you..." He pressed the bouquet of flowers into his aunt's hand and left her standing there, bewildered.

Half an hour later, Jupiter and Bob were at the address that Jordan Parker had given them. It was in Venice, a neighbourhood of Los Angeles, in a quiet residential street. Pete had remained in Rocky Beach to pick up his MG from the auto workshop.

When Bob and Jupiter arrived at the small block of apartments, they saw a dark blue Honda motorcycle in the car park. A large Batman sticker was emblazoned on the side.

"Now what?" asked Bob.

"Now we're going to see who owns the Batcycle."

"How are you going to do that? Ring every apartment and ask?"

"I was thinking of something more effective. Just park your car over there—opposite the Batcycle."

Then Jupiter got out, went to the motorbike, grabbed it by the handlebars and shook it vigorously. The Honda responded with flashing lights and a shrill alarm. Dogs started barking from the courtyard.

The First Investigator ran back and jumped into the Beetle. They ducked down and peered over the dashboard.

A moment later, a blond-haired man in sportswear ran down the staircase and into the car park. When he saw that no one was at the motorbike, he looked up and down the street.

However, he didn't notice the two boys in the Beetle.

Irritated, he pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket, held it to his ear and moved away from the shrill alarm siren. The side window of the Beetle was wound down halfway. Due to the noisy alarm, the man had to speak so loudly into his phone that Bob and Jupiter could hear what was being said.

"It's me. False alarm, but I can't switch off the siren. I didn't bring down the key. Can you throw it down for me?" Then he walked towards the building.

"Bob! His voice!" Jupiter murmured in surprise. "Did you recognize it?"

"I sure did!" Bob nodded excitedly. "That was the voice from the cassette tape—Javier Juárez!"

The man was now standing in front of the apartment block. A window opened on the second floor. A young woman with short black hair nodded to the man and threw him the motorbike key.

Bob and Jupiter gasped at the same time: "Alba!"

16. Reconstruct from the Beginning

“I don’t understand anything anymore,” Pete told his friends half an hour later, looking questioningly from one to the other. “Batman lives in the same apartment as Alba?”

The First Investigator’s gaze darkened. “We’ve been deceived—from the very beginning,” he concluded.

On the way back to Rocky Beach, Jupiter and Bob had had time to talk about the case and think about it.

“After Batman got back into his apartment, we figured out his apartment number from the window Alba had appeared at. Then we took a look at the names on the intercom panel—‘Theodore and Alba Morrell’. They’re a couple!”

“Luckily, Alba did not notice my yellow Beetle parked near the Batcycle,” Bob added.

“Now we have to reconstruct everything that happened in this whole case in the light of the new findings,” Jupe decided.

“How do we go about it when Alba was our client?” Pete interjected, confused.

“Didn’t you listen, Pete? We were deceived about everything. It doesn’t matter if she was our client. I knew there was more to it than that. I just knew it!” Jupiter started pacing back and forth. He was more excited than ever.

“Reconstruct from the beginning...” Bob muttered, “in the light of the new findings, as you put it so well, Jupe.” He flicked through his notes. “Firstly, Alba wanted us to decode her father’s tape message...”

“Not really, Bob. She came to us because she was supposedly looking for a player for the microcassette. That was already a lie. Everything about her visit here at the salvage yard was a lie. Javier Juárez is probably not her father and the tape message didn’t come from him either—Theodore Morrell recorded it. Alba didn’t accidentally delete half a minute of it. It was deliberate and only served to lure us in. I had to admit that I missed suspecting a fraud here because if the cassette was left by Juárez, the prison authorities would have checked it before handing it to her.”

“In the first place, when we heard the tape message, couldn’t we have spotted that the voice wasn’t Night Shadow’s?” Pete asked.

“Well, we could’ve,” Bob confessed, “but it was difficult. If you remember back then, Juárez was energetic and was basically yelling at us most of the time... so it was difficult to tell.”

Jupiter continued: “Do you remember how flabbergasted Alba was about all the supposed coincidences? That we not only knew Juárez, but that we were the ones who got him into prison? Well, they weren’t coincidences... It was meant to look that way so that we wouldn’t question anything, but instead throw ourselves into the investigation—which was what we did.”

“What about Batman? I mean, Theodore Morrell...” Bob asked.

“He was her accomplice the whole time. The bag-snatching on the street was all an act. The break-in in her motel room never actually took place. She probably didn’t even stay in that motel.”

“—But you got mugged that night,” said Pete.

“Yes, but the main purpose was not for stealing the cassette tape. It was to make us believe that we had an adversary whom we needed to overcome,” Jupe said.

“We also found out something that wasn’t a deception,” Pete noted, “that the painting in Mr Byron’s house was a forgery, for example.”

“That’s exactly what we were meant to find out, so that we can set off in search of the real *Red Buffalo* as quickly as possible.” Jupiter paused in his walk through the trailer, sat down, and pinched his lower lip hard. “—And the house in California City... we didn’t find that out ourselves. Rubbish-George gave us that information... and when I think back to his night-time visit, some things struck me as odd... but before I make false accusations, we should get to the bottom of it.”

He abruptly stood up and said: “Come on, fellas! We have to get to the harbour.”

The sun was out for the first time in days. Rubbish-George was on the deck of his houseboat, lying on a run-down deckchair. Instead of looking at the play of light on brass surfaces, he had put a hat over his face and was dozing. He only became aware of his visitors when Jupiter stood on the pier in such a way that he blocked the sun from the vagrant.

Blinking, he took off his hat. “Whoa! The three super sleuths! What distinguished visitors! How’s the investigation going?”

“The case is coming to an end,” said Jupiter. “Only your role in it is still unclear to us.”

“My role?” Rubbish-George straightened up, his uncertainty clearly visible. “What do you mean by that?”

“Alba,” Jupiter said, fixing Rubbish as if he wanted to hypnotize him. “—The woman who bought your tuba. What else did she buy from you?”

“You mean that charming lady I met at the salvage yard?” George recalled. “Well, I never saw her again after that.”

“Oh really?” Jupe remarked. “Okay, so who’s the little birdie? Who gave you the information about Night Shadow?”

“Oh, that’s what you’re talking about.” Rubbish cleared his throat, stood up and stepped unsteadily from one foot to the other like a schoolboy who had been caught with his hand in the biscuit tin. “I was going to tell you, but... I just didn’t know how.”

“Out with it, George!” Pete said.

“Okay, okay,” George relented. “You asked me about Night Shadow, so I asked around... but I got nothing. I came back here, and a while later, a man turned up. He knew that I wanted to find out about Night Shadow, and then... you know, sometimes it’s not so easy when you live from hand to mouth. It’s easy to make mistakes... especially when someone comes along and offers you two hundred dollars.”

“That man paid you money?” Bob asked. “For what exactly?”

“He paid me to give you the information,” Rubbish reported with a lowered gaze. “You know, the stuff about California City, and a certain House of Roaring Waters.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Bob interjected. “Some guy came and paid you money to tell us something?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” George affirmed. “It sounded so harmless, and he was so nice.”

“Okay, what did he look like?” Jupe asked. “Can you describe him? Did he tell you his name?”

“No name,” George said and then paused. “He was quite tall—like Pete—and he had blond hair.”

“Blond hair!” Bob remarked. “Did he come on a motorbike?”

“Uh... yeah, come to think of it,” George replied. “I saw him leaving on a dark blue motorbike.”

“Batman!” Pete exclaimed.

“Who?” George wondered aloud.

“Never mind,” Jupe said. “So you were off guzzling down bottles of high-proof alcohol, and then you came to me in the middle of the night and told me that stuff.”

“How would I know whether that stuff was accurate or not?” Rubbish said. “You asked me to find out something, I did, and someone came up with something.”

“Normally, it is you asking for money in return for information,” Pete said. “Now it is the other way around. Wouldn’t you have suspected something fishy if someone gave you money to tell us something?”

“Uh... I was in a bind,” George admitted. “It wasn’t until he left that I realized what a stupid promise I had made to him. I didn’t know what to do. I took his money so I had to... uh... fulfil my obligation.”

“—For two hundred dollars!” Bob scoffed.

“In any case, I did warn you!” George defended himself. “I told Jupiter you shouldn’t trust anyone. No one! By that, I include myself, of course!”

“What was I supposed to think, Rubbish?”

“Well, I thought, because you’re so clever...” The vagrant slumped his shoulders in surrender. “I know I’ve messed up. Sorry.”

If Jupiter listened to himself, he had already forgiven Rubbish, but he wasn’t going to let him off the hook so quickly. He crossed his arms. “Were you also responsible for Theodore Morrell mugging me?”

“Who?”

“The man who gave you the information,” Jupe clarified. “That night, when you came into the salvage yard, he slipped in as well. Just after you left, he whacked me on the head, took something from me, before running off.”

Rubbish shook his head. “I don’t know anything about that.”

Jupiter believed him. “All right, all right. Let’s leave it at that... for now.”

They left the pier and made their way back to the car park.

“So Batman paid Rubbish-George to give us the clues,” Bob said on the way to the car. “—But what would have happened if Rubbish hadn’t turned up by chance at the salvage yard?”

“Then Alba would have found another way to get the clues to us. She probably already had a plan for that, which was then simplified by Rubbish’s appearance. She hadn’t thought that we would immediately have someone on hand who could find out more about Night Shadow for us, so she had to intervene quickly... and got Batman to bribe Rubbish.”

“I still don’t understand it,” Pete confessed. “The information wasn’t wrong at all. Bob found Hugenay’s stolen notebook in California City.”

Bob frowned. “There were these tracks on the floor that led us to the secret compartment. We had surmised that Batman had beaten us to it. At the same time, we were surprised that the notebook was still there. What if—”

“—What if it was the other way around?” Jupiter interjected. “That’s right, Bob! Batman didn’t steal anything from the secret compartment under the bed... instead, he put the notebook in there!”

“—So we could find it,” Bob continued. “That’s why he wasn’t very careful. Thanks to the clear marks on the dusty floor, I knew immediately where to look... and then there was

something else—the neighbour who suddenly appeared said something strange: ‘Say hello to Marjorie for me’.”

“Marjorie?” Pete asked. “Who is Marjorie?”

“I was wondering the same thing... but I have an idea. Wait a minute!”

They had reached the car, but instead of getting in, Bob switched on his mobile phone and tapped away on it.

“What are you checking now?” Pete asked.

“I’m just looking at what real estate agents there are in California City. There shouldn’t be many as there aren’t many houses for sale... Here’s Marjorie Carter, a real estate agent. Just a minute!” Bob called the number and put it on speakerphone.

“Carter Properties, you’re speaking to Marjorie. What can I do for you?”

“Good afternoon, my name is, er, Roberto Fernandez. It’s about the house on Washington Street in California City.”

“Oh, really? Quite a property, isn’t it? Well, to be honest, I already have an interested party but she hasn’t made up her mind yet. It’s quite possible that she’ll back out. Then the house would be up for grabs.”

“Yes, I know. You’re talking about Alba Morrell, right? That’s my sister.”

“Is that so?”

“You have already given her the key, haven’t you?”

“Yes, so she could have a look in her own time. She was going to let me know in a few days.”

“That’s why I’m calling. Unfortunately, she has changed her mind.”

“Oh, that’s a shame, and now you’re interested in the house yourself?”

“Er, no... but you were still a great help, Marjorie—a very big help, in fact.”

Bob ended the call and looked triumphantly at his friends.

“Really, really good, Bob,” Jupiter praised. “Now we’ve really got something to work on.”

17. The Day after Tomorrow

The Three Investigators got into the Beetle to return to the salvage yard. As soon as they arrived, they quickly climbed through the Cold Gate into Headquarters so that Aunt Mathilda couldn't intercept them again.

"So the house was also part of the deception," Jupiter continued their discussion. "Juárez never lived there. Alba only gained access to it for a few days so we'd have somewhere to find a notebook—Hugenay's notebook.

"This simply tells us that all the false leads point to none other than Victor Hugenay. He was and is at the centre of this case. He is behind everything—that's the only way it makes sense. Javier Juárez died in prison—that's the only shred of truth in the whole story... but he never stole the *Red Buffalo*—Hugenay did."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, Pete," Jupe said. "Hugenay was the thief, not Juárez. Hugenay swapped Sylvester Byron's painting with a forgery he had made beforehand and then hid the genuine one in his secret hideout—the old gate house in Mercury."

"Wait a minute, Jupe," Pete interjected. "Now you're saying that the old gate house is Hugenay's hideout. How did you come to that?"

"I got suspicious because of several observations," Jupiter said. "Hugenay claimed that he watched from a short distance, Juárez entering the old gate house and disarming his security systems. Okay, he could have seen Juárez hiding the key under the roof... but picture this—if Juárez did rig the door lock, then he wouldn't have been seen getting zapped there. So how could Hugenay have known that the door lock was rigged in the first place?"

"It's possible that Hugenay himself got zapped once, and he later observed Juárez doing the key-turning manoeuvre," Pete argued, "like how I saw Hugenay do."

"Yes, but there are more," Jupe continued. "There were metal rungs for getting down the shaft to the tunnel. The rungs could have been rigged like the trapdoor, but Hugenay never even checked before climbing down. It was as if he knew that they were not rigged. That's why I suspect that the booby traps were set by Hugenay and not Juárez."

"—But if Hugenay had set the booby traps, why didn't he disarm that at the trapdoor?" Pete asked. "Instead, he let the two officers suffer the electric shock."

"He did claim that he didn't know about the trapdoor," Jupiter replied, "but I suspect that he wanted to get the painting alone, by himself. To do that, he had to get one or more officers out of the way, so he chose not to disarm the trapdoor."

"Eventually, he still turned in the painting intact," Pete wondered aloud. "With time pressing, why was he so persistent in doing it alone?"

"Seems to me that he did not want his movements or actions to arouse any suspicions that he knew more than he had chosen to reveal," Jupe said. "This ties in well with what happened next—I followed him in the tunnel without him knowing. The tunnel was about fifty metres in length, and it had pipes and gadgets lined up everywhere to provide many places to hide something. Guess what? Without hesitation, he went straight to get the tube container. He didn't even need to search for it."

"He could have seen Juárez hiding the painting there," Bob suggested.

“Put it this way, Bob,” Jupe countered, “if that had been so, then Hugenay would have taken it a long time ago. I’m convinced Hugenay himself put it there. The old gate house was Hugenay’s hideout, not Juárez’s—as he made us believe.

“Oh, yeah, should I even mention what happened after he got the painting? He went straight to the second exit out of the tunnel. Then at the dam wall, after rescuing me, he made his way into the inspection gallery, and onwards to the new gate house. He had to be really familiar with that place.”

“Okay, how did Juárez get into the picture?” Pete asked.

“The theft of the *Red Buffalo* happened before our *Fire Moon* case. Then, the three of us got in Hugenay’s way, where we first got him arrested, and then Juárez. Recently, Hugenay heard on the radio about the heavy rains and the danger of the dam over-topping at Mercury. That meant that the *Red Buffalo* hidden there would be destroyed. By coincidence, that was preceded by Javier Juárez’s death. Hugenay took advantage of that to devise his plan.”

“So are you now saying that Hugenay used the opportunity of Juárez’s death to blame the theft of the *Red Buffalo* on Juárez, and then Hugenay helped recover it so that he could use it as a bargaining tool for a reduced sentence?” Bob asked.

“Exactly!” Jupe affirmed. “There was no way that Juárez could have countered it as he was already dead. The plan was ingenious... and it worked.”

“So Hugenay hired Alba and Theodore as decoys and told them what to do,” Bob continued. “We thought we were solving the mystery of the *Red Buffalo*, but we were just following a breadcrumb trail that Hugenay laid for us.”

“I can see the trail clearly now,” Pete said. “Alba came with the cassette and got two clues erased. Batman bribed Rubbish to give us the erased clues. He then planted the notebook in the California City house for Bob to find. That led to Sylvester Byron finding out that his painting was replaced with a forgery... Then we got stuck.”

“As a result, we were the ones who asked Hugenay for help,” Jupiter added. “We sought contact with him, not him with us, and that gave him a much better negotiating position. We were convinced all along that we had stumbled across the case by chance.

“Hugenay was then in a comfortable position of being able to act as the saviour of the Fortunard painting... and to dictate the terms, because time was pressing. The DA’s office had the choice of accepting his proposals or being responsible for the destruction of the Fortunard. Hugenay had planned all this to perfection.”

“Unbelievable,” said Pete. “So the Fortunard was something like Hugenay’s retirement fund. Sooner or later he would have been released from prison, and then he would have cashed in on the painting.”

“—But a destroyed Fortunard wouldn’t have done him any good,” said Bob. “So he swapped his retirement fund for a reduced sentence.”

The Second Investigator frowned thoughtfully. “However, that could have gone very wrong. In the end, it was super close and we were there just in time. If only we had understood the clues earlier...”

“That’s true,” Jupiter agreed, “but if the trail had led to Hugenay earlier, we would probably have become suspicious. Besides, he couldn’t have known exactly when the valley would be flooded, otherwise he might have planned differently.”

Pete was still not entirely convinced by the theory. “Alba and her husband had to do a lot to put us on track... but how were they able to coordinate with Hugenay during that time? How did they know exactly what to do?”

“Parts of the plan could have been devised earlier,” Jupiter pondered.

“—Which meant that Alba must have been a close confidante of Hugenay’s for some time,” Pete said.

“—Which is quite conceivable.” Jupiter seemed to be satisfied with this answer.

However, it wasn’t enough for the Second Investigator. He took out his mobile phone and tapped on it.

“I want to know what exactly Hugenay negotiated,” the First Investigator said and reached for the phone. “How long was his sentence reduced by?”

“Who are you calling?” Bob asked. “Cotta?”

“Certainly not.” Jupiter reached for the handset and switched on the loudspeaker for his friends to listen in.

Moments later, he had Captain Caine on the line. She seemed to be in a good mood. “Ah, Jupiter Jones, the young man everyone’s talking about. I have to admit, I thought you three were cheeky boys who backed down when things got serious. However, I was impressed by your courage in going after Hugenay. It was incredibly stupid, reckless and, above all, completely unnecessary... but it did impress me... So, what can I do for you?”

“I’d like to know what deal Hugenay actually negotiated with the DA’s office. The painting has been saved, so Hugenay has fulfilled his part of the agreement. What did he get in return?”

“Good timing for your question, because I’m currently preparing Hugenay’s release papers.”

“What did you say? His release papers?”

“That’s right. I didn’t realize it earlier as I only took charge of this section two months ago. Anyway, this wasn’t his first deal of this kind—it was just the most spectacular. Hugenay’s lawyer had negotiated such deals with the DA’s office in the past.”

“Negotiated what exactly?”

“Hugenay had revealed secrets, for example, hiding places for paintings and art objects. He put former accomplices on trial. For each of these efforts, he was given a few months off his sentence. Saving the Fortunard painting earned him another twelve months, which means that he’ll be... wait a minute, let me confirm... he’ll be released the day after tomorrow.”

“The day after tomorrow?” The First Investigator almost dropped the phone.

“Yes, the day after tomorrow,” Caine confirmed. “—On parole, of course. He mustn’t violate any of the conditions of parole, otherwise that’s it for his new-found freedom... but for now, he will leave his comfortable cell here in two days’ time.”

Jupiter was stunned. “Thank you, Captain.” He hung up.

Bob and Pete looked as stunned as the First Investigator.

“Is that really true?” asked Pete. “In two days, Victor Hugenay will be at large again? After everything we did back then to put him behind bars?”

Jupiter nodded. “—And this time, we helped him out. We did everything he expected us to do. We blindly chased after a mystery instead of asking ourselves how likely it was that Night Shadow’s supposed daughter would suddenly turn up on our doorstep. We didn’t even get suspicious when Bob found the notebook, even though Batman should have taken it with him.”

“That’s not true, Juve,” Bob disagreed. “We got suspicious. You had doubts about the case from the start.”

“—And did this stop me from falling into Hugenay’s trap? No, on the contrary.” Jupiter slapped his hand on the table top. “My goodness! Hugenay has won... because we were too stupid!”

“We weren’t too stupid,” Pete countered. “Hugenay was just a bit smarter... and he had help from someone who would probably have done anything for him.”

“Huh?” Jupiter frowned. “Are you talking about Alba? Why would she have done anything for him?”

“I found out something while you were on the phone,” Pete announced. “A couple of years ago, Theodore and Alba had a business registered with the California Secretary of State. It has since been terminated, but the details were retained online.”

“What’s significant about that?” Bob asked.

Pete held up his mobile phone. “The business was registered under the names of ‘Theodore Louis Morrell’ and get this... ‘Alba Dominique Jaccard’.”

The First Investigator’s eyes widened.

“Jaccard?” Bob gasped for breath. “You mean she’s related to Hugenay?”

Pete nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking, but she doesn’t have to be his daughter. Maybe she’s his niece or something.”

“Definitely a relative,” Jupiter surmised. “—One of a few, perhaps the only person in the world, whom Hugenay trusts and has always trusted. That’s the only reason she was able to carry out such a delicate mission for him. She knew him well enough to know what he expected of her. We, on the other hand, don’t know much about Victor Hugenay—I’m realizing that once again.” The First Investigator began to fiddle with the piece of grey fabric hanging over the armrest.

“Daughter or niece or whatever, it doesn’t really matter,” Bob said. “He won’t have his retirement fund now, so that’s a win for us.”

“That’s true,” Pete agreed. “When he gets out, he can’t sell any more Fortunards. He’ll be empty-handed.”

“I have my doubts about that, Pete. Who knows how many other works of art he has in some other obscure hiding places—” Jupiter broke off. He stared at the grey fabric between his fingers. “Wait a minute!” He smoothed it out. It was soft fleece, rectangular, about the size of a towel... or a painting...

Jupiter sucked in the air and jumped up. “Fellas! We have to go back there!”

“Back where?”

“Where? To the dam, of course!”

18. *Chapeau!*

Jupiter chose to remain silent for the entire journey to Mercury. This annoyed Pete very much, but after half the journey, he resigned himself to his fate.

When they arrived, Mercury was a sight of devastation. The spillway gate had been closed and the water had drained away. However, the mud that had been washed down had buried half the streets and surrounded dozens of houses. Clean-up operations were underway everywhere, even now—after dark. Bright floodlights had been set up, and the yellow, red and blue lights of the clean-up and police vehicles flickered everywhere.

The three of them watched the scene from the spot on the road where the road block had been.

“They’ll never let us through to the old gate house,” Pete commented.

“We don’t want to go there anyway,” said Jupiter.

“We don’t? Why?”

“—Because we’re going up there.” Jupiter pointed to the dam wall.

So instead of continuing into the valley, Pete took the turn-off that led to the top of the dam. After he parked his MG, the three of them got out and hurried to the left abutment. From here, they could see that the water level of Rosalia Lake had visibly dropped.

“Not a soul around up here,” Bob realized. “Everyone who is here is probably busy clearing up down below.”

Jupiter led them down the stairs to the door he had used to leave the inspection gallery two days ago. It was now locked. Mr Riley had probably seen to that. Jupiter stepped aside and looked at the Second Investigator. “Over to you, my friend.”

Pete pulled his lock picks out of his pocket but didn’t get to work. Instead, he just grinned superiorly. “Jupe, if you’d be so kind as to finally let us in on it, otherwise you’re welcome to try fiddling with the lock yourself.” He dangled the bunch of lock picks from his outstretched index finger in front of Jupiter’s nose.

“All right, then.” The First Investigator took the folded grey fabric out of his backpack. “When I was finding my way out through the gallery two days ago, I found this. It was lying on the ground in a puddle.”

“We already know that,” Pete reminded him impatiently. “Your shred of shame.”

Jupiter was unperturbed by Pete’s remarks. “In the heat of the moment, I thought it was a diversionary manoeuvre by Hugenay. Later I realized—no, it’s not part of a prisoner’s clothing. Although it is of the same colour, this is too soft. However, this is not just any piece of cloth. Just now at Headquarters, I finally figured out what this was used for.”

“Like what?”

“It’s very soft fleece. You can use it to protect delicate things from damage—a painting, for example. Look at the size. It’s about the size of the *Red Buffalo*.”

“What are you saying?” asked Bob.

“After Hugenay rescued me, he left me at the staircase and went into the inspection gallery to make his way to the new gate house. He claimed that he had to leave to complete his task quickly before anything unforeseen happened. That I took it to refer to turning in the *Red Buffalo* safely. However, that wasn’t his only reason. He needed a few moments alone,

by himself, in the gallery. In the minute he had, he opened his tube container, took out the *Red Buffalo* and unrolled it. In the process, he must have dropped this protective fabric on the ground. It got wet, so he left it there.”

Bob didn’t realize what Jupiter was getting at. “Why would he have done that? To make sure the painting was still in the tube?”

Jupiter shook his head. “No, Bob. He unrolled it to take another painting out of the tube and hide it here in the gallery.”

“Another painting?”

“—One that was separated from the *Red Buffalo* by this piece of fabric. It’s a way to keep two paintings in one roll without damaging them.”

Pete’s eyes widened. “You... you mean there is another painting hidden here?”

Jupiter nodded. “Hugenay didn’t give up his retirement fund. He just cut back on it. When he gets released the day after tomorrow, he’ll return here to recover the second painting, which nobody knows anything about.” Jupiter smiled. “—But it won’t come to that, because we’re here now... and we’ll get the painting before he does.”

Pete promptly unlocked the door—it was child’s play for him. They opened the door and in front of them was the higher-level inspection gallery. Then they climbed down the ladder to the lower-level gallery, and Jupiter led them to where he had found the piece of fabric.

Excitedly, they shone their flashlights into every nook and cranny. The many pipes, cables and gauges on the walls and ceilings offered plenty of hiding places.

Then Bob shouted: “That pipe on the ceiling! There’s something stuck behind it!” He stood on tiptoe but couldn’t reach it.

Pete just about managed it. He carefully pulled out something that looked like a pipe at first. Only when he held it in his hands did they realize that it wasn’t a tube container, but something rolled up in a piece of grey fabric.

They very carefully unrolled it together. Out came a piece of canvas wrapped in the fabric... followed by another piece of fabric... and a second piece of canvas.

“I was wrong, fellas,” said Jupiter. “There wasn’t one other painting in the tube. There were two!”

“Well, you’re right about Hugenay hiding something here, Juve!” exclaimed Bob enthusiastically.

The paintings were much smaller than the *Red Buffalo* and depicted colourful island landscapes reminiscent of the South Seas. Both were signed ‘F. Fortunard’.

Pete frowned. “They look so familiar. Mr Byron has a similar painting. It is called *Island World* or something.”

“Exactly! His is one of the three in a series. The other two were understood to be lost since the Second World War,” Jupiter recalled. “Not anymore, apparently.”

“Fellas, if these really are the two Fortunards everyone thought were lost, that would be a sensation!” Bob was very excited. “We’ve found a treasure!”

Jupiter beamed. “That’s what we’ve got... and not only that—”

“—We can put a spanner in the works for Hugenay after all,” Bob said.

“He’ll be amazed when he finds these two paintings gone,” Pete added.

“—If he gets out at all,” said Jupiter. “As the one who stole these paintings, Hugenay will get his early release revoked quicker than he got it.” The First Investigator smiled with satisfaction. “It’s a good thing we foiled his plans.”

“Jupiter Jones!” Inspector Cotta smiled grimly when The Three Investigators entered his office the next morning. “So have you finally realized that you can’t hide from me forever? Well, then please sit down—all three of you. What I have to tell you will take a fair bit of time.”

“Very well, Inspector, but before you start, I’d like you to take a look at something.”

Bob went to an almost empty worktable, made a little space and, with Pete’s help, very carefully unrolled the two Fortunard paintings. Meanwhile, Jupiter explained what they were dealing with.

Cotta just stood there speechless.

A few days later, after many hours spent refurbishing the children’s bicycles to completion, The Three Investigators came together at Headquarters to formally close the case.

Bob had almost finished his report. Only one last question remained. Inspector Cotta had promised to call in the afternoon to answer it. The three of them were nervous.

Finally, the phone rang. Jupiter promptly switched on the loudspeaker, and then answered the call.

“The decision has been made,” Cotta announced, “and unfortunately... you won’t like it. Victor Hugenay was released this morning.”

“Excuse me?” Pete gasped.

“You’ll have to explain that to us,” Jupiter prompted the inspector.

“It’s quite simple. Hugenay didn’t steal the two *Island World* paintings. They were thought to have been lost for about eighty years. In his statement, he said that he searched for them for years and finally found them in the attic of an abandoned farmhouse somewhere near the French-Swiss border. According to art recovery experts, this is conclusive. It is clear that he didn’t steal the paintings, but found them.”

“In the first place, how did the paintings get lost?” Bob asked.

“As you already know, in the midst of the war in Europe, many paintings were stolen or destroyed. Nevertheless, there had been attempts to move valuable items to safety. These two, however, were lost in transit and somehow ended up hidden in that farmhouse.”

“—Until our hero came along,” Bob retorted. “Then how did the two paintings end up hidden together with the *Red Buffalo* in the old gate house?”

“We did ask him,” Cotta replied. “He said that Juárez stole the *Island World* paintings from him, and hid them there along with the *Red Buffalo*.”

“—But he would never have given the *Island World* paintings back if we hadn’t tracked them down,” Bob interjected. “Instead, he would have cashed in on them sooner or later!”

“Probably... but he claims it was his plan to present the paintings to the public after his release. He wanted to restore his reputation and start a new life as a righteous art historian. We have to give him the benefit of the doubt and accept what he says.”

“—Then that night, he could have given you all three paintings, but he chose to hide two.”

“—Because his task was to recover the *Red Buffalo*,” Cotta replied, “and like I said, he wanted to use the other two paintings to launch a new beginning for himself... but now that’s not going to happen, and he didn’t seem too disappointed about it.”

“You are putting it as if he is the owner of those two paintings,” Bob argued.

“—Finder, not owner,” Cotta clarified. “As it is now, the authorities are satisfied with Hugenay’s explanations. The paintings will be handed to an art recovery agency to handle.”

“Jupe, why don’t you tell him about your—” Bob began, but the First Investigator raised his hand to stop him.

“There is this other thing,” Cotta continued. “Hugenay behaved in an exemplary manner throughout the entire operation in Mercury. He did not attempt to escape and incidentally saved Jupiter’s life. This also dispelled the district attorney’s last doubts... and so he is free again. I’m not thrilled either, but that’s the way it looks...”

“So that’s it, and now I have to get back to work... Anyway, I hope not to see you brats any time soon... if that is even possible...” Cotta then hung up.

Silence spread through the trailer.

After a few minutes, Bob finally spoke up: “Jupe, why didn’t you tell Cotta about your theory that the old gate house was Hugenay’s hideout and not Juárez’s?”

“What’s the use?” Jupiter replied. “My theory was based on my observations and not concrete evidence. As you brought up earlier, Hugenay could claim that he did in fact see Juárez hide the paintings there. From what Cotta just said, Hugenay is sticking with his story that Juárez was the thief. Whatever it is, Juárez is no longer around to give his version of the story.”

“Uh, yeah...” Bob continued, “but what about Alba’s part in this whole thing? Since we know where she and Batman live, we could—”

“Er, Bob,” Pete interjected. “With Cotta’s latest information, don’t you think you have a report to complete, and then have it filed up in the archives?”

Bob knew exactly what Pete was hinting at.

“It’s all right, Pete,” Jupiter said. The feeling of powerlessness and helplessness that he had feared did not materialize.

“You don’t seem as upset as I would expect,” Bob remarked. “I thought that if Hugenay got out, you would be completely devastated.”

“As Cotta just said, Hugenay saved my life. Who knows what would have happened to me if I had been left dangling at the dam wall a moment longer? ... In fact, I’ve been thinking a lot about this case over the last few days,” the First Investigator confessed. “I’ve gone a little too far with my bold approaches. Maybe it’s time to put aside my doggedness when it comes to Victor Hugenay.”

“Hear, hear!” Pete said approvingly.

“—And let’s face it,” Jupe added, “a Hugenay in freedom has its advantages. There’ll never be a dull moment for us.”

Bob laughed heartily. “—As if it ever would be otherwise.”

“Juupeeterrr!” the voice of Mathilda Jonas echoed across the salvage yard. “Here’s an express letter for you!”

Jupiter left the trailer and returned shortly afterwards with a plain envelope addressed to The Three Investigators. There was no sender’s name or return address on it, however, the boys recognized the handwriting... as they had only recently seen it in a small notebook.

The First Investigator opened the envelope. Inside was a very familiar printed card... and on it was a single word written in the same handwriting:



Not only that, there was a faint greasy spot at the bottom-right corner of the card.